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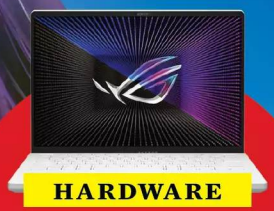

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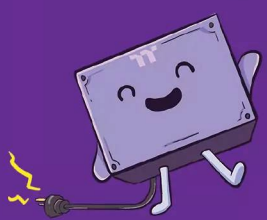

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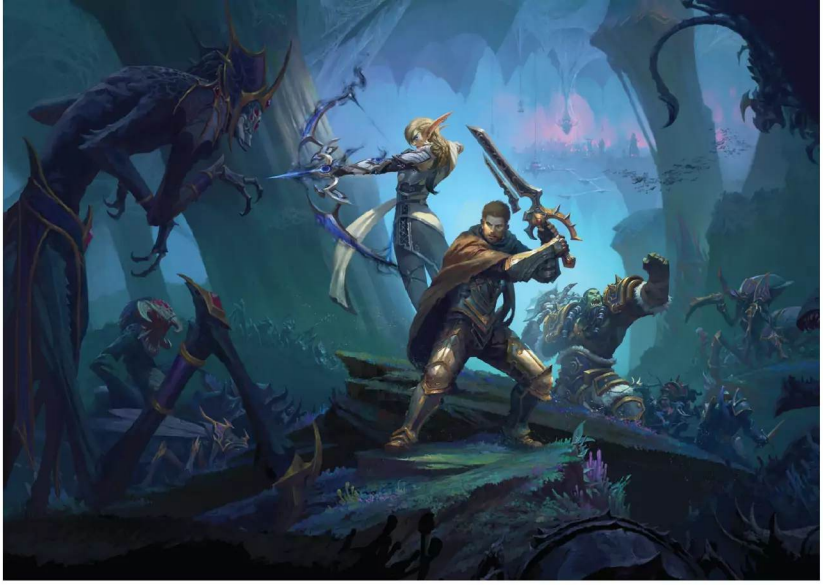

This month
Remembered slaying many a boar in OG *WoW*. Then immediately crumbled to dust when he realised that was now two decades ago.

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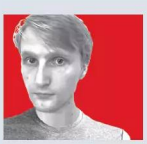
Twenty years after its launch, it's easy to forget just what an incredible, industry-shaking, landmark release World of Warcraft was. It not only created and popularised the MMO genre, but took PC gaming to an entire new level of online gameplay, with pioneering social systems and tons of fantasy adventure on offer. Today, a whole new epic WoW adventure is about to begin, with The War Within arriving as the dramatic opening chapter to WoW's new Worldsoul Saga. Can the Harbinger of the Void be stopped? Or will Azeroth be brought to its knees? Turn to page 40 to find out.

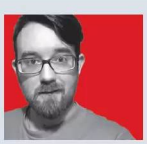
BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

The PC PowerPlay team



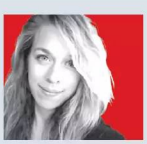
JOSH WOLLENS

This month
Realised he'd spent over 600 hours playing *Fallout: New Vegas*. Immediately committed to 600 more.



FRASER BROWN

This month
Undertook the most epic of quests in *Pax Dei*, one worthy of legend. The making of new trousers.



LAUREN MORTON

This month
Crafted a mace and hit a load of skeletons with it.

CHRIS LIVINGSTON

This month
Drank one too many ruby bliels in the PC PowerPlay Towers bar. Fell off his stool. Oh Chris.

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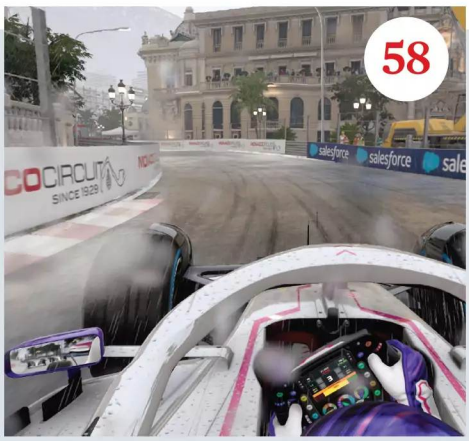

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BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Devs create an SGF tombstone for fallen game studios

It's been a rough couple of years for the games industry – and even laying it out like that feels like an understatement. Back in February, the number of layoffs and studio closures had already hit over 16,000 people, and the number of employees losing their jobs hasn't exactly slowed down since.

A high-profile recent shock came from Microsoft, which shut down *Dishonored* maker Arkane Austin as well as Tango Gameworks, the studio behind surprise hit *Hi-Fi Rush*.

It was an especially messed-up situation because, as plenty of developers noted in the aftermath: a studio probably shouldn't sink after a single flop like *Redfall*, but even if they do make an excellent game, that still won't save them from the margin-fuelled manoeuvres of executives who can't seem to put a straight answer together that justifies putting hundreds out of work.

TOP: *Hi-Fi Rush* was a surprise hit, then Microsoft closed the dev anyway.

"EVERYONE LAID OFF, DOWNSIZED, AND 'MADE REDUNDANT'"

IN MEMORIAM

To commemorate some of the recent losses, New Blood Interactive – the publisher behind games like *Ultrakill* and *Gloomwood* – rented a billboard in downtown Los Angeles to express its frustration. "Gone but not forgotten," read the billboard, posted outside an LA hotel that's a popular venue for Summer Game Fest attendees. It laid out the start- and end-dates of several studios: Arkane Austin, Roll7, Tango, Volition and London Studio, paying tribute to "Everyone laid off, downsized, and 'made redundant'".

The billboard then reads: "Thank you for great games, from your

TECTONIC SHIFT

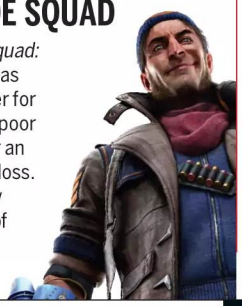
LIFE AND DEATH

Remember *Life by You*, the *Sims* competitor from Paradox Tectonic? Well, stop remembering it, and stop remembering Paradox Tectonic while you're at it. Paradox (the publisher) cancelled the game and, just hours later, shuttered the studio too. It just didn't meet its standards, apparently. ■ *JW*

JOKERS

HUGE LOSS ON SUICIDE SQUAD

Rocksteady's *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League* has been a complete disaster for Warner Bros. The title's poor sales led to the publishing giant, per an earnings call, taking a $200 million loss. Warner Bros has moved Rocksteady onto assisting with a director's cut of *Hogwarts Legacy*. ■ *RS*



STONKS

TEAM GREEN

Off the back of an appetite for AI accelerators – graphics cards, by another name – Nvidia rose to claim the title of Lord Money Bags when it topped Microsoft to become world's most valuable company. It was short-lived, however, as investors wiped $500 billion off its value. ■ *JR*

TOP: New Blood's billboard was right by an SGF hotspot.

ABOVE: *Gloomwood* has positive reviews on Steam. *Redfall* not so much.

friends at New Blood," followed by: "We love you, we miss you, we hate money." In the interest of context "We love you, we hate money" is a slogan, of sorts, that New Blood Interactive sometimes uses when it has a sale.

But that doesn't subtract from the sentiment. Rather, it shows that this is a philosophy the publisher is genuinely committed to. One of the founders of New Blood Interactive, Dave Oshry, also took to Twitter to redouble the gesture, posting: "I'm always trying to find new and creative ways to waste money. Miss y'all."

Gloomwood developer Dillon Rogers added, "We can't get you your old jobs back, but we can at least help to make sure your work isn't forgotten. Much love from us at New Blood."

It's a very sweet and simple gesture of solidarity. More than anything, the lineup of studios shows just how much is being lost right now. These aren't teeny-tiny experimental startups that fumbled the bag (not that it'd make an unceremonious dismissal any better). Many of them, Arkane Austin especially, have created games that have earned rightful places in the PC gaming canon.

But hey – dry your eyes. At least for a beautiful moment in time we created a lot of value for shareholders, and isn't that worth, uh, something? ■

Harvey Randall

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Witcher's Work
CDPR's devs are loving *Elden Ring*'s DLC.

Creative Block
A mad *Minecraft* scientist has voxelised Google Maps, effectively letting you export the whole world into the game.

Bombshell News
Fan-made *Fallout 2* remake *Project Arroyo* now has over 100 devs working on it.

Publisher interference
The Internet Archive was forced to remove half a million books from its library after being sued by publishers.

Too hard, really?
Shadow of the Erdtree hit 'mixed' user reviews on Steam.

Going Hollow
Neither SGF nor the most recent Nintendo Direct had *Hollow Knight: Silksong* news, driving fans even further around the bend.

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy is ready for the apocalypse. While The Spy is dubious that an apocalypse will ever happen, The Spy recognises the value of always having a plan. Here's the thing, though: The Spy is not some deranged prepper, hoarding guns and beans and individually sealed military-grade wet wipes in some concrete bunker. This is foolish behaviour – both an obvious target and, frankly, just boring. What's the point of even surviving the end of the world if you can't live a little?

Instead, The Spy will roam the lands, scavenging what The Spy needs to make it through the day. To this end, The Spy has spent the last 30 years burying useful items at various places around the country. A Swiss army knife in a field in Dubbo. A year's supply of Pot Noodles in a park in Adelaide. Now That's What I Call Music! volumes 32, 33 and 35 on the bank of a river near Wentworth Falls. Sure, there are downsides. It is a hassle to make a cup of tea when you can't remember if you buried your kettle in Parramatta or Penrith. But should the worst happen, at least The Spy will still be able to enjoy a modest lunch accompanied by the greatest hits of the mid-to-late '90s.

EGG! HE SAID EGG!

Simply put, The Spy will not put all The Spy's eggs in one basket. The Spy's eggs have been cast far and wide, in both a metaphorical and literal sense. The Spy has buried a lot of eggs. Imagine, for instance, that the eggs are upcoming videogames, and the basket is the Epic Games Store. Now imagine that a site called EpicDB – a service similar to SteamDB, which uses API access to collate data from the platform – launches with access to way more data than you intended. And now stop imagining, because it actually happened, and the result is a lengthy list of unannounced games reminiscent of the GeForce Now database leak of 2022.

The industry did at least learn from the previous debacle. This time around, the list is predominantly made up of codenamed projects – leaving sleuths to try to piece together what each could be. Rockstar for instance, has a project named *Semla*, which some are speculating will be a PC port of *Red Dead Redemption* under the shaky logic that its file size is similar to that of *RDR* on PlayStation 4. The Spy will believe it when The Spy sees it.

But based on viewing associated information, from DLC listings to cloud save info, some more solid guesswork has emerged around other games in the list. The prevailing theory right now is that Square Enix's *Skobeloff* is the PC version of *Final Fantasy XVI*, and that *Momo* is the rumoured *Final Fantasy XI* remake. And Sony's *Utah* is believed to be a PC version of *The Last of Us Part 2*.

THE RESULT IS A LENGTHY LIST OF UNANNOUNCED GAMES

That last piece of speculation feels like the safest bet of the bunch, not least because it's not the first time *The Last of Us*' sequel has been touted for PC. In early June, leaker Billbil-kun claimed that development for the PC version was essentially finished. The reason it hasn't been announced, they claim, is that Sony wants to hold back its release to coincide with the second season of HBO's The Last of Us TV series in 2025. If true, it confirms one thing for sure: Sony is also dubious that the apocalypse is near. Spy out. ■

The Spy

THE SPY
The Spy is always prepared for the worst.

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Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

The *Banana* game's community is certainly, ah, creative.

GOING BANANAS

Over 30,000 players occasionally click a JPEG – why? Good question

If you ever crack open the SteamDB charts and leaf through the platform's illustrious history, you might find that in May of this year, a game called *Banana* reached the middle of the pack on Steam's top 100. When I sat down to look into this, it was at number 47 – just four ranks shy of *Cyberpunk 2077*, and ranking above actual videogames such as *Fallout 76*, *Diablo IV* and *Slay the Spire*. You might also wonder why this happened, since *Banana* is a game where you click on a picture of the curved yellow fruit and do nothing else.

I wanted to know why, too. So did everyone at PC PowerPlay, actually, as we sat in a morning call on a Wednesday (which I maintain is the most accursed day of the week). We stared, baffled, as tens of thousands of active players all clicked on a picture of a banana, seemingly driven to some eldritch madness by a simple image. Because my torrid work is never finished, I bravely jumped on the grenade and did a little digging – and it turns out there's a whole genre of these things, which I'm going to henceforth dub EAIGs, or 'egg-adjacent item games', because I have lost my mind.

EAIGs – again, a term I have fully just invented – spawned from the older (and thus less popular) *Egg*, which, even as I write this, still has over 4,500 people playing it (with an all-time peak of 11,000 players). *Egg* is very similar to *Banana* in that you click on a picture of an egg for the vast majority of your playtime, though you'll mostly be leaving it idle if you value your sanity.

The real games attached to *Egg* and *Banana* have precious little to do with the software. Instead, they have everything to do with Steam items. You might have a few of these suckers sitting in your Steam inventory as we speak – earned by playing games you own, these items can be sold on the marketplace for cash that goes into your Steam wallet, or traded 1:1.

They're slightly different from the Steam trading cards you're likely to have a collection of – more like the *Banana* game's version of *TF2* hats. Their prices can fluctuate based on varying factors, meaning that it's possible to play the market by buying low and selling high.

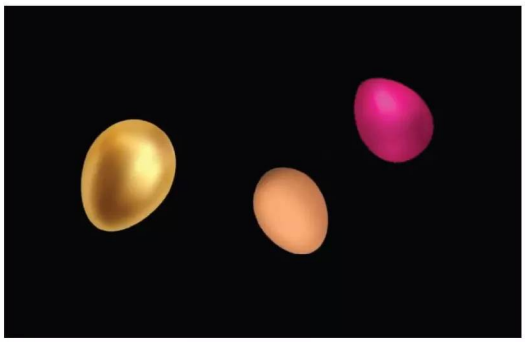
BANANARAMA

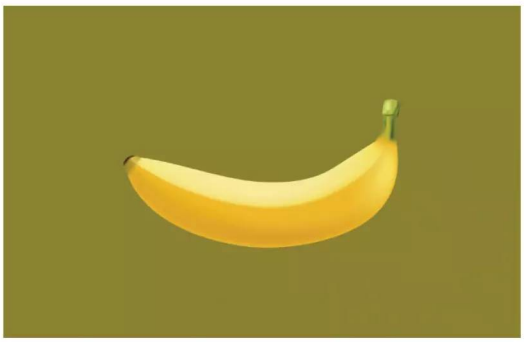
Banana was directly inspired by *Egg*: its creator, Robert Partyson (I somehow do not think that is their real name) wrote "this is just a worse made egg game" on the game's Steam forums. "Lol," he added, wisely.

Breaking it down, Partyson explains that, as long as you dip into the game to click occasionally, you should get "like 2 items once a day". You can then venture onto the Steam Marketplace to sell them or buy more. There's

Egg, Banana

You know how when *TF2*'s hat system was released, it completely changed the landscape of the game – with some players even abandoning the FPS side of things entirely to become hat merchants? Turns out you don't even need a proper game to get the same results. You just need a banana – though an egg'll do in a pinch.





FAR LEFT: Egg egg egg egg egg egg egg egg egg egg. Egg.

LEFT: Behold, the humble banana, the picture that launched thousands of clicks.

BANANARTISTS *Community submissions from patriotic fruit-lovers on the official Banana Discord*

CHERRYNANA BY HYPERLODIUM
This is a cherry. It's close to a banana, but not quite! Keep going, Hyperlodium, I'm sure you'll get there eventually.

KOALA BANANA BY BUGACHI
You might notice that this is a koala, and not a banana. It's not even a fruit. I'm really teetering on the edge here.

SINKHOLE BANANA BY RICKYBOBBY_
I give up. Nothing's real any more. I'm throwing myself into the bananabyss.

SKULLNANA BY MKD
One day, your flesh, too, will be banana. Until then, have this horrifying work of art and keep waiting.

a handy bot in the (publicly available) Discord for *Banana* which breaks down what you have to actually do to get your saleable items.

"By opening the game and playing for one minute, after that every three hours a banana will be able to be collected by clicking. After playing [for] one hour you unlock the rare drop pool which will drop a banana every 18 hours. Just come back to the game every [3-18] hours and click once." There are also special events for rare, events-based bananas.

POTASSIUM CONTENT

Most common bananas sell for a pittance, a few cents at most, though some are listed for absurd amounts – like a Diamond Banana I found listed for several hundred real, actual dollars. No-one's buying it for that price though, with most offers around a far more reasonable $81, but still. Asking around, I'm told by the (genuinely friendly, wholesome) community that the *Banana* game has two factors: grinding for 'nanas, and investment.

See, it's actually possible to play EAIGs without clicking on eggs, or bananas, or whatever it is, as long as you have a little cash to spend. If you want to interface with these games purely by buying and selling banana.jpg stonks, you absolutely can do that.

Some players are just doing it out of a mixture of philanthropy and general memeage – I watched as one similarly-baffled player asked, "Who tf is buying regular bananas, [I] don't understand," to which another player replied, "Me. I buy in bulk from people for a few cards or other bananas... I just want a bunch of them. Which by the way you should let me have yours."

"WHO TF IS BUYING REGULAR BANANAS, [I] DON'T UNDERSTAND"

I like to imagine they're collecting all of the bananas into a big swimming pool, and are about to jump into them like the world's softest, most unpleasant Scrooge McDuck dive.

There's also a budding little art community going on, tucked away in this bizarro-world corner of the internet. Players can drop in suggestions for bananas into an art channel, and there's some genuine creativity going on from these card sellers amidst all the cursed horrors and copyright infringement.

What surprised me most was a lack of genuine sketchiness – sure, you could make the argument that these aren't really, actually videogames, but Steam's marketplace has been around for ages, and these are hardly the first idle games that drop items. It's reminiscent of NFTs, just... sans all the speculative, ape-driven nonsense.

It helps that the stakes are pretty low, too – you're just getting cash to spend on other Steam games. The community has less of that big tech bro stank about it, and reminds me more of kids trading rocks in a playground – and I mean that as a compliment. I feel like I cracked open a door expecting to stumble into some secret mafia hideout and instead found a bunch of relatively chill dudes racing their pet snails.

At the very least, EAIGs are devoid of the blockchain nonsense that keeps trying to worm its way into gaming. And I'll take speculative banana and egg JPEGs over crypto any day of the week. ■

Harvey Randall

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

GENERATION GAME

Vincent Abric, engine and tools programmer at MOTION TWIN, on procedural generation

Sometimes, there's a moment you can look back on that you identify as a turning point in your life. For Vincent Abric, this was reading a technically detailed John Carmack interview on the subject of *Quake III Arena*. "That's the moment I told myself, 'I want to do this,'" he says.

Convincing his father to buy him a book on C++, Abric taught himself programming before going on to learn computer science at university. Having successfully earned a master's degree in computer graphics, he entered the game industry, eventually expanding his skillset to encompass not just graphics, but also physics, UI, gameplay programming and more.

Procedural generation – in the context of *Dead Cells* and *Windblown*, at least – fundamentally means that "the assets are not placed by hand in the levels. Each time you play, you will encounter something different. But also, it should not be too generic".

Although Abric did not personally work on *Dead Cells*, he's learned a lot from colleagues who did; including an important difference in how the technique is used in 2D, compared to how it is currently being used in development of the 3D *Windblown*.

"When you create a level [in 2D] you just say, 'Here's a wall, there's a platform here, there's somewhere that the player can access another room,' and that's all. Then the engine will place the decorations, and create the level. There's no flags, and there are no markers. In *Windblown*, we wanted to have more control because it's a 3D game. We have a system where we can paint with a brush on the chunks of a level. We'll assemble like, 20 chunks and create a whole level. These chunks are built by the level designers. Then they can paint on them to say, 'In this zone, I want trees, a building, small decorations that won't break the line of sight'." The engine will then draw from the pool of available assets, while making sure that the size is correct. "We will pick randomly one of the objects to have more variety, but we know that it will take the same amount of space."

FOLLOWING PROCEDURE

When the player character is moving around in a 3D environment, procedural generation can potentially create problems for both them and the AI. "You could have for example a platform with two exits," says Abric, "and then the algorithm could put platforms on top of one another; which we don't want, as it creates problems with the AI of the mobs." *Windblown*'s world is a series of floating islands, where the starting point is always at the bottom, and the end of the level is at the top, "So you will not have problems like this."

The nature of procedural generation means that it produces unexpected results during development. These things can be frustrating, or funny; but they're always removed. In Abric's experience so far, at least. "I'd like to one day have something not anticipated that's really cool, and we can keep it," he says.

Although procedural generation in 3D requires more work than in 2D, it remains a significant time saver. "You can create a lot of chunks without placing each bush, each tree, by hand. You can reuse some content, because chunks are not linked to a biome.

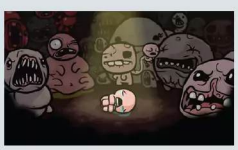
"The main downside is that you won't always have control of what's being generated. So you can end up with levels that are not really fun or beautiful sometimes, because the generation picked something that doesn't work well. Creating a roguelite, the players are doing so many runs, that's not really a big problem if it's one in a hundred."

While there are a small number of restrictions that procedural generation imposes – 'prebaked' lighting can not be used for example, as the levels aren't consistent and premade – it can work in tandem with human talent to produce games that feel fresh again and again. ■

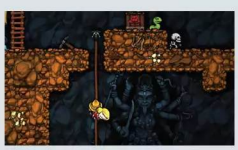
Luke Kemp

THAT'S SO RANDOM

Four more procedurally generated gems



THE BINDING OF ISAAC
Procedural generation? Yes. Disturbing imagery and lore? Yes. Fun to play? You know it.



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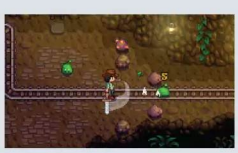

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DIABLO IV: VESSEL OF HATRED

RELEASE October 8, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blizzard

The first expansion to *Diablo IV*, Vessel of Hatred introduces a new character class, Spiritborn, as well as a whole new region and co-op gameplay options.

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 6

RELEASE October 25, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Treyarch

The online military shooter returns once more, promising a new cinematic single-player campaign and a multiplayer experience with the return of round-based Zombies mode.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

RELEASE November 15, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Quebec

Finally, after more than 15 years of gamers asking for the series to go to Japan, it does, with players stepping into the shoes of samurai Yasuke and shinobi ninja Naoe.

SHATTERED SPACE

Starfield's first piece of DLC has been announced and is set for release sometime in 2024. *Shattered Space* is based around House Va'ruun, a religious cult that believes in the Great Serpent, an eternal space snake deity. The expansion will let gamers visit House Va'ruun's home planet, too, and will almost certainly also introduce a few new weapons and pieces of armour. But, thankfully, not horse armour. Full details at shorturl.at/4rQBe

12 months+

GTA VI

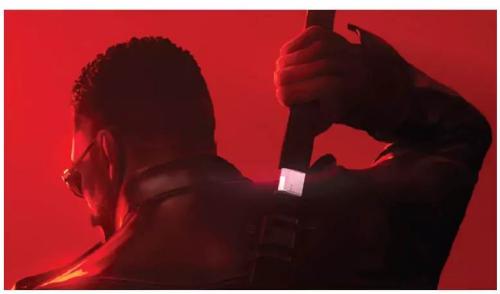
RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Rockstar Studios

Everything we're hearing right now points to the next *Grand Theft Auto* launching in 2025. But whether or not that includes PC is unknown. Better get saving for a new GPU.

FALLING FRONTIER

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Stutter Fox Studios

Conquer a vast, procedurally generated star system in this sci-fi RTS in which gathering intel and ensuring efficient logistics are key factors to successfully beating your foes.



BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Lyon

From the talented devs who brought PC gamers both *Prey* and the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, singleplayer, third-person adventure game.

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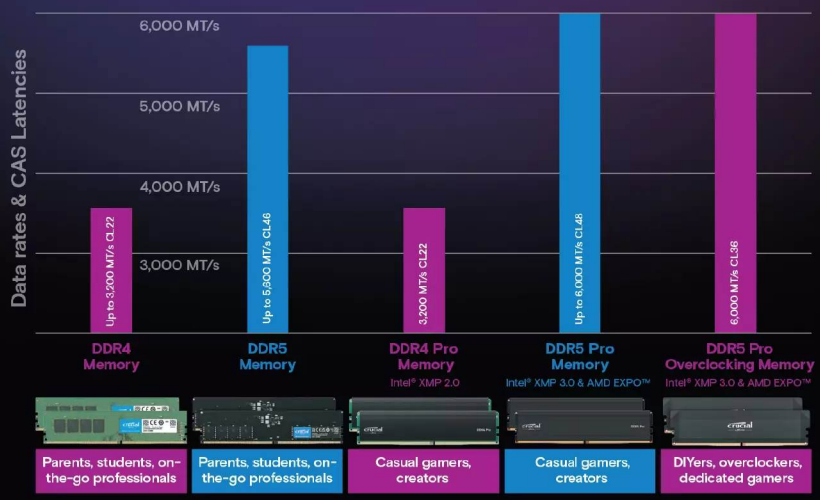

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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
August 30, 2024	Massive Entertainment	Ubisoft	ubisoft.com

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

Ubisoft's latest is slick but disappointingly familiar.

If there's one thing Ubisoft loves, it's a multi-functional animal. As I'm shown new footage of *Star Wars Outlaws* in action, it's clear that hero Kay Vess' furry little axolotl-like friend Nix is another of their signature living Swiss army knives.

In other words, a successor to *Assassin's Creed Origins*' Senu the Eagle, *Immortals Fenyx Rising*'s Phosphor the phoenix, and *Far Cry*'s entire menagerie of useful pals.

So, yes, that means Nix can send out a pulse that highlights foes and interactables, do a distracting little dance to attract attention, and stun people by leaping at their faces. I even see him setting up traps, rigging up barrels to explode in a burst of choking smoke the next time a guard patrols past them. It's only at that moment that I realise he isn't just another animal companion – he's a mobile phone, too.

OK, that needs a bit of unpacking, but bear with me. In play, Kay is pure scoundrel – she sneaks around Imperial bases and criminal strongholds, using Nix's help to catch guards unawares. She digipicks open doors, follows power lines to disable devices, and cracks terminal passwords to get into systems and issue subverted directives to the enemy forces. And when all hell breaks loose, as it so often does in Star Wars, her third-person shooting is lightly spiced with gadgetry, including electrified shots and stun blasts.

All together, the Ubisoft game I'm being reminded of most is *Watch Dogs 2*, Kay sporting setting-appropriate equivalents of hacking skills with Nix as her equivalent of a magic smartphone. Though your options don't seem quite as broad as in that game – at least not in the footage I'm shown – there's that same sense of being more mischief maker than assassin, putting the focus on creativity over pure deadliness. It's a great fit for the classic Star Wars rogue-with-a-heart-of-gold archetype.

SHOOTING IS LIGHTLY SPICED WITH GADGETRY, INCLUDING ELECTRIFIED SHOTS

SMUGGLE TROUBLE

Of course the flipside of that coin is that, once again, I'm looking at footage of a new Ubisoft game and simply being reminded of previous ones. There's a lot going on even just in these relatively short segments of gameplay – I see Kay sneaking, hacking, getting into shootouts and punch-ups, dogfighting in space and dodging debris, climbing her way around a wrecked ship, and more. There's plenty of variety on show. But what's disappointing is how unsurprising it all is.

Ubisoft receives a lot of criticism for its very iterative design, and though I do think that flaw is overstated sometimes, it's certainly evident here – despite the big new setting to play with, ultimately *Outlaws* seems like exactly what you'd imagine after hearing the phrase 'Ubisoft Star Wars game', no more, no less.

NEW INFO

Though the sum of it all will I'm sure be greater than its parts, I can't say that any individual thing I see Kay doing looks notably fun on its own. Though stealth has those interesting elements of organised chaos to it, ultimately what you're doing most of the time is finding ways to stun guards or get them looking the other way so you can run up and clock them. Gunfights look solid but familiar – you can pick up discarded rifles for more firepower, blow up barrels, and charge up a special ability that lets you mark multiple targets and drop them all at once with a barrage of shots.

The space battles nail the look and, most importantly, sound of a Star Wars dogfight, but it's the same veering around and leading your shots you've done before (if this is tech copied over from *Starlink* it wouldn't surprise me). Traversal seems even a step back from recent *Assassin's Creeds* – it's probably appropriate that a

space smuggler isn't as agile as Ezio, but that doesn't make pointing at the next ledge and pressing A seem exciting.

IMPERIAL MEASUREMENTS

Is that a dealbreaker? Well no, not necessarily. I think you could make broadly similar arguments about Ubisoft's best games – were the boat battles and one-button combat of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* actually that good in isolation, or was it more about how they fed into a broader pirate fantasy?

The developer's great strength, which I think is too often dismissed, is scale. Very few studios build worlds at the level of size and detail that Ubisoft can, and the idea of combining that with a setting as rich as Star Wars is really exciting, especially with a swaggering smuggler as the lead instead of another squeaky clean Jedi. That element of exploration is, unfortunately, the one thing that isn't on show in this demo, but what is clear is how much work has gone into an authentic Star Wars feel in the characters and environments. Blow that out into multiple planets and it does start to sound like a pretty amazing virtual space to just mess about in.

Though space travel is far from seamless – you basically fly up to a planet and then choose one of a handful of set landing spots – it does sell the idea of a big galaxy. Various nods to the wider franchise, such as a sequence where Kay salvages for tech from the High Republic era, add some welcome depth too, and Kay herself feels right at home, from her plucky attitude to her very '70s hair.

They've chosen a great moment in time in that universe, too. The game is set between The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi – a period that's been particularly fleshed out in recent comics. It's a time when the Empire is more oppressive than ever, but also more vulnerable, and as things start to slip from its control, criminal factions run amok.

That includes very familiar organisations such as Jabba's cartel, full of weird alien thugs and bounty hunters; but also more unusual ones like Crimson Dawn, a mysterious and conspiratorial cabal with spies everywhere. Ubisoft's fleshing out this mafia ecosystem with its own new ideas too. The Ashiga Clan, visually inspired by feudal Japan and functioning more like an insect hive than a traditional gang, is completely new for *Outlaws*, and their brief meeting with Kay in the demo is certainly intriguing. Meanwhile the Zerek Besh crime family, previously only known from a few brief appearances in the comics, have been fully developed to become the game's primary antagonists.

Kay is able to work for and against most of these factions, building or destroying her reputation with each based on her actions. The demo follows her as she's hired by Crimson Dawn to screw over the Pyke Syndicate – instead, she flips the situation around, backstabbing her employers and gaining favour with the Pykes. Later, she twists the knife further by heisting a holy relic from a Crimson Dawn stronghold, and taking it to the cagey Ashiga Clan to earn an audience and bargain for the release of an ally. You'll get to choose your own path through the Underworld, and the idea of being able to interact with all these unsavoury types and play the wild card, using all these factions to your own end, is appealing.

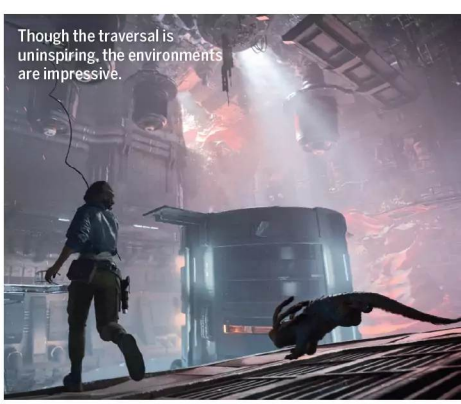
CHOOSE IT OR LOSE IT

What's not clear yet, however, is quite how much agency you'll actually have. Gaining and losing reputation with different organisations will certainly have a mechanical and narrative impact, but it's hard to determine from what I've seen whether that means major changes to your standing in the world, or just a few switched out lines of dialogue and a discount at certain shops. And how much of what's in this demo was the result of fixed story elements versus actual player choice? Done well, I think this factional aspect of the game could really be the special seasoning that makes it stand out, but if it's too surface level it may undermine the underworld-spanning story the game is trying to tell.

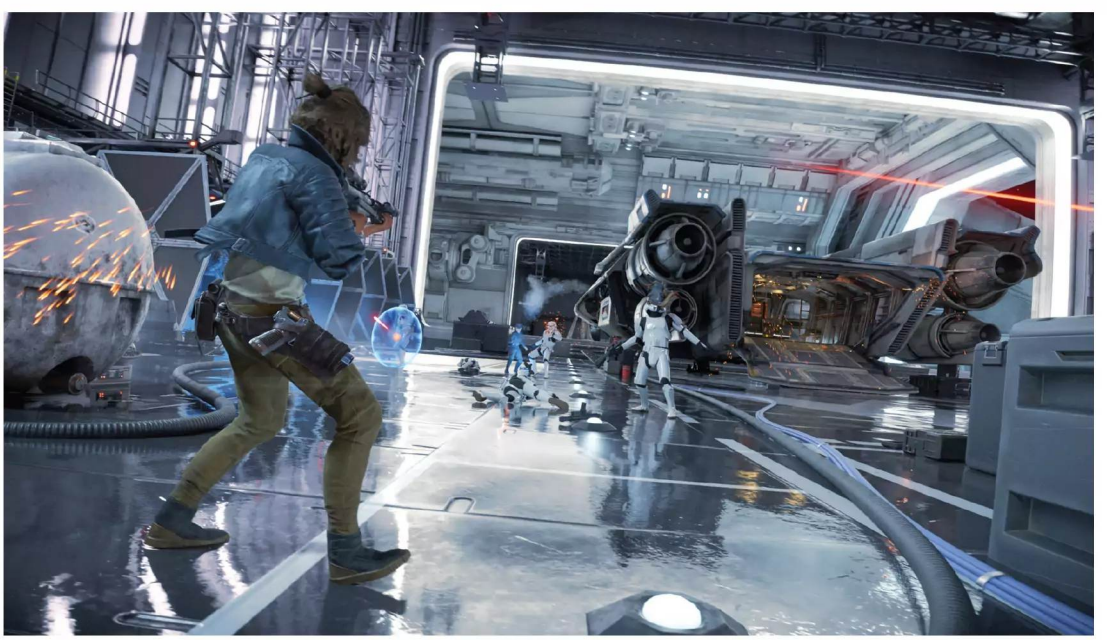
As someone really excited by the pitch for *Star Wars Outlaws*, it's frustrating to come out of an early look like this still talking in such vague terms, especially given the August 30 release date is fast approaching. I'm left a little on the fence still – I can't wait to see Star Wars realised at the scale and level of craft that Ubisoft is known for, but it's hard not to be concerned that even the most interesting action on show here simply feels cribbed from earlier projects.

Robin Valentine

THE GAME IS SET BETWEEN THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK AND RETURN OF THE JEDI



Though the traversal is uninspiring, the environments are impressive.



ABOVE: Spaceship battles seem particularly simple, even showing you exactly where to fire to lead your shots.

LEFT: Electrified shots let you take down shielded opponents, which seems to be about as deep as combat goes.

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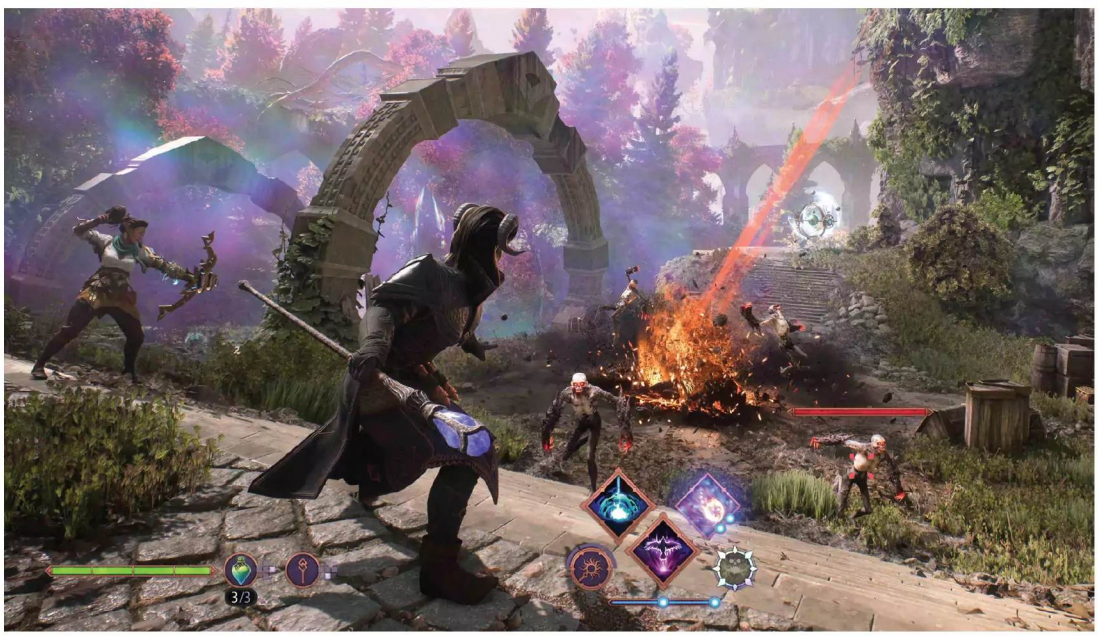
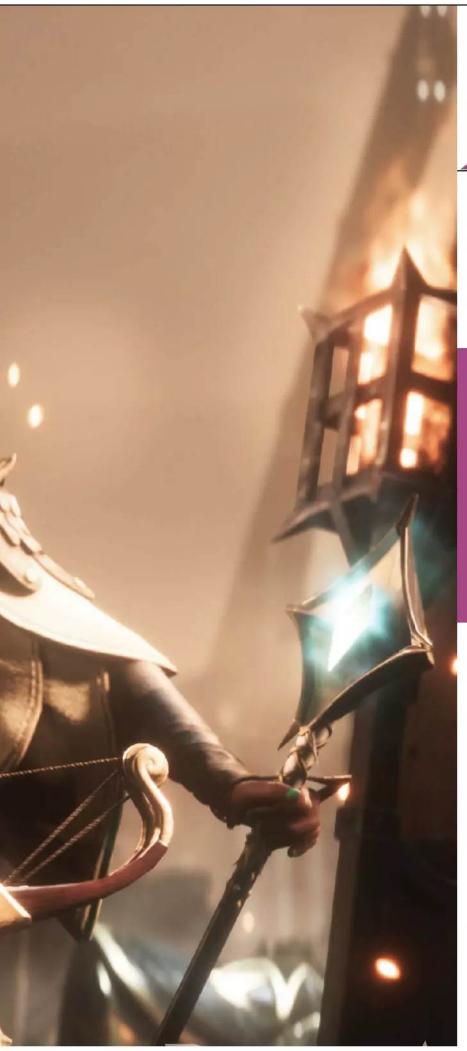
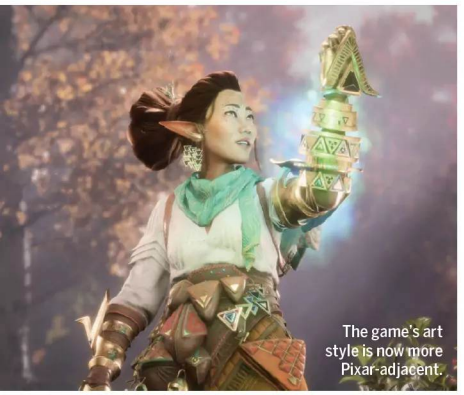
ABOVE: Some of *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*'s new characters posing.

RIGHT: The RPG aspect of the series seems to have been almost entirely removed.







The game's art style is now more Pixar-adjacent.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Spring 2024	BioWare	EA	shorturl.at/lwsN1

DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD

Dragon Age becomes what it was probably always destined to be

Here, let me relieve you. After spending about an hour watching some very tired BioWare developers navigate the opening of the next *Dragon Age*, I can assure you that the weird, hero-shooter tone of that companion reveal trailer doesn't carry into the game itself.

No sir, *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* (née *Dreadwolf*) doesn't have much time for japes at all. Things are grim. Dark. Fraught, even. A sinister hard-boiled egg named Solas is trying to dissolve the protective Veil between the physical and magical worlds, flooding the Tevinter Imperium capital of Minrathous with demons.

The main character, Rook, is rather against that sort of thing. So are their demo companions: magical detective Neve, scout Harding (from *Inquisition*) and Varric (basically the series protagonist at this point). Off you go on a quest to guard the Veil.

It's precisely the kind of tense, race-against-the-clock plot you expect from a *Dragon Age* game, in other words. Strange, then, that once the demo was over, I kept finding myself thinking about *Mass Effect*, and about the possibility that *Dragon Age* had left the last vestiges of its TTRPG-inspired past behind.

The demo I was shown opened on Rook and Varric being faced with a choice. They were looking for Neve, and to find her, they needed to interrogate a bar owner. To do that, they had to get through her squad of hooded goons. The two options on either side of the dialogue wheel? Fight through the thugs, or persuade your quarry to come quietly.

THE DEMO I WAS SHOWN OPENED ON ROOK AND VARRIC BEING FACED WITH A CHOICE

Veilguard lets you customise your character's body type, sliding a cursor across a triangle that can make your character stocky and chubby or tall and muscular or anything in between, and you can pick from one of six backstories for them. If you're nostalgic, you can choose to affiliate your Rook with the Grey Wardens or Antivan Crows, which you'll recognise from all the way back in Origins.

My Rook was a human rogue with a rugby player's build and an affiliation with the Shadow Dragons: someone who seemed like she could take a beating, someone who didn't seem too interested in conversation. Violence it was, then.

Maybe it's just the Baar-Dau-pilled quarter of my brain that goes ape for any kind of floating fortress, but BioWare's art and tech teams really knocked it out the park with this one. Minrathous looks incredible. It's dark and spiky and vertiginous and awe-inspiring in all the right ways. It reminded me a lot of depictions of Valyria before the Fall, from the Song of Ice and Fire series: the dark heart of a dystopian magical empire, its skyline dominated by a magically suspended palace in the shape of a saw-toothed crescent.

FIRST LOOK

DRAGON EFFECT

It's the kind of place that's destined for a fall. And oh, look, here it is. Solas' ritual to unVeil everyone is already underway, and demons have begun pouring into the lavishly rendered streets in level-appropriate droves.

Time for Rook and co to get to work, and do you know what that looks like more than anything, at least to me? *Mass Effect*. Specifically, *Mass Effect 2* and *3*.

As someone with many hundreds of hours in *Dragon Age: Origins*, the most traditional RPG in the series, it's a change in mechanical emphasis that has me sceptical, a scepticism that isn't helped by BioWare's recent track record. I'm very curious to see more, but right now BioWare's fantasy RPG seems thoroughly, gorgeously fantasy, yet I'm wondering if the RPG is just hiding, or if it's gone for good.

Joshua Wolens

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
November 15	Ubisoft Quebec	Ubisoft Quebec	shorturl.at/8hW5v

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

The best-looking AC combat in ages, as well as strong stealth

One of my oldest videogame wishes is about to be granted. *Assassin's Creed* is finally bound for Japan, but I've resisted getting too excited until I see it in action. Ubi says *Shadows* will return to the series' roots as a stealth game, similar to last year's *Mirage*. Here are my thoughts after an hour-long hands-off demonstration.

Shadows is still firmly in the territory of Valhalla combat – lock on, dodging, animation cancelling – but I noticed some improvements. Enemies seemed less spongy, and in general both Yasuke and Naoe are more deliberate with their attacks. The pace of combat was a bit slower, and looked really cool. It's also great to see enemies actually react to each of Yasuke's strikes. Nothing pulls me out of an *Assassin's Creed* fantasy faster than guards who tank hits like it didn't even bother them.

Piggybacking off last year's *Assassin's Creed Mirage*, stealth doesn't seem to be an afterthought in *Shadows*. Naoe can scale walls, hop between clusters of rooftops, and quickly ascend to higher ground with her grapple hook. She has tools to silently kill, distract, or displace guards so she can avoid violence altogether. Naoe can also crawl through grass, *Metal Gear Solid*-style.

Ubi has been saying that Yasuke is the more capable fighter of the duo, but that doesn't track with what I saw. Sure, Yasuke has more brutal finishers, but the Ubi dev piloting my demo cut down handfuls of guards just as easily with Naoe's katana and chain blade. I was already planning on playing Naoe most of the time, and now I don't know what Yasuke has going for him beyond chopping guards' heads off every time he triggers a finisher. Apparently there are some mechanical differences between the two in combat – Yasuke can block attacks while Naoe can only evade, but is that a meaningful difference when both accomplish the same thing?

UBI HAS BEEN SAYING THAT YASUKE IS THE MORE CAPABLE FIGHTER OF THE DUO

The demo began with a quest to track down a corrupt samurai. Similar to *Mirage*, *Shadows* won't always direct you straight to a target. It'll give you hints collected by quest givers – the general area they're in, what they look like, their job – and leave the rest up to you. This feature worked pretty well in *Mirage*, though sometimes it was too easy to find targets or locations.

Mirage had a special currency you could use to bribe officials and learn your target's whereabouts. It seems like *Shadows*' 'spy network' will fill a similar role. I didn't get to see this feature in action, but it looks like you can designate an area on the map for your spies to search for information on your target.

PLAYED IT

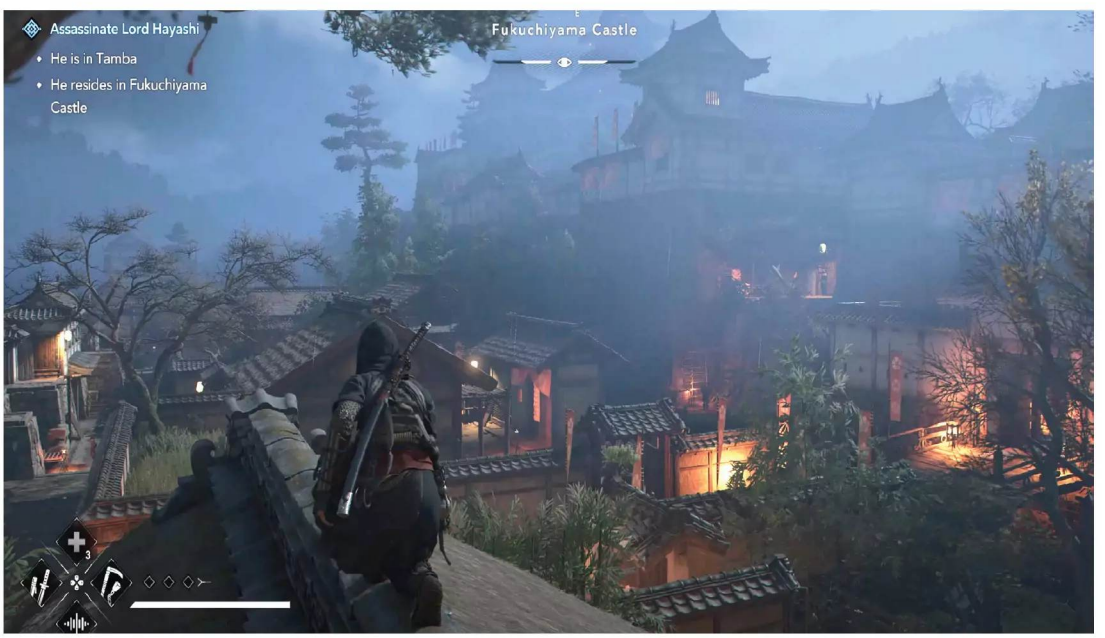
HELLO DARKNESS

Ubi has been talking up *Shadows*' new dynamic lighting and how it enhances stealth. Our presentation didn't call much attention to it, but I spotted a light meter at the centre-top of the UI that indicates how hidden you are. When Noae was in a full shadow, she seemed nearly invisible. It's a good thing the indicator was there, because the environment itself wasn't very dark. Alleyways with no light sources were still fully readable, and after the demo pilot snuffed out a lantern with a kunai, I could barely see the difference.

Lots of stealth games are allergic to simulating real darkness, probably because it's too hard of a design challenge unless you have Sam Fisher's night vision goggles, but having some contrast between light and dark is really important when you're asking players to stick to the literal shadows. I'm worried that *Shadows*' new nighttime sneaking will be dulled by an overabundance of light. Hopefully cranking down the gamma will do the trick.

Morgan Park

You play as both Yasuke and Naoe.



ABOVE: Yasuke spotted that guy trying to steal his copy of PCPP magazine.

LEFT: Naoe is a master of stealth, and has access to a grappling hook for manoeuvring.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Out now (Early Access)	Mainstream Industries	Mainstream Industries	shorturl.at/Rac3l

PAX DEI

A promising medieval 'social sandbox' from EVE alumni

P*ax Dei* is an exciting prospect. A 'social sandbox' MMO from Mainframe Industries, a developer that includes many *EVE Online* alumni, it eschews concepts like levels, classes and heroic journeys, instead promising players a medieval life. You can become a tailor, an architect, or a knight serving in a barony, upholding its laws.

"The idea is that we'll have emergent trades, and then we'll have artisan guilds, and people will come together and they will form big towns," says game director Reynir Hardarson. "And over time you'll have the formation of actual civilisations. But currently, the game is a little bit more like a survival game, because it's missing a lot of pillars."

All the trappings of the survival genre are here: you must scour the world for resources, construct workbenches and other devices, refine said resources or turn them into tools, and eventually grow from a near-naked survivor into a self-sufficient veteran all decked out in armour. You'll also need to take breaks to eat and drink, but skipping meals won't kill you – you'll just be missing out on some buffs.

Even without all the planned pillars, however, there's still a hint of the social sandbox. Where *Pax Dei* differs from *Valheim* and other popular survival games is the focus on multiplayer. Rather than a co-op game you'll play with a small group of friends, you share the world with lots of other players, who can choose to work together in clans, or compete in PvP zones. But while you don't technically have to cooperate with other players, avoiding human interaction and striking out on your own can be tough.

YOU'LL NEED TO TAKE BREAKS TO EAT, BUT SKIPPING MEALS WON'T KILL YOU

THE QUEST FOR TROUSERS

My self-imposed quest to make some trousers really encapsulates this. First I had to craft a tailor's toolkit at my carpentry station, and then I had to use the toolkit to create another crafting station where I could make my trousers. Both demanded a bunch of different resources and crafted goods. But with that finally placed in my ramshackle base, I was ready to finally cover up my surprisingly smooth legs. Or so I thought. *Pax Dei* had something else in mind for me: more crafting and building. Hours of it. More devices, more crafted goods, hunting trips into the forest. And lots of waiting around with bare knees.

Eventually I did make some trousers. And I learned a valuable lesson: people are *Pax Dei*'s most important resource. By joining a clan, I could use resources and goods gathered and crafted by my pals to speed up the process. Maybe the clan would have a tailor, letting me avoid the work altogether. Even hermits entirely opposed to joining a community have some options. You might bump into another player and trade with them. Or you could make a trip to the market to buy what you need.

PLAYED IT

Hardarson also admits that the balance was a bit broken in the alpha build I was playing, which made the early game much harder – hence my trouser trials and tribulations. In Early Access, the experience should be different. "This now feels very much like a *Valheim* model survival game where you have to build everything yourself," he says, "but the idea is that you don't need to do that. You can go and sell your wares in the marketplace, get gold, and you can buy your trousers pretty early on. And, of course, there's better balancing – you can build and craft easier, way faster, if you want to go down the complete crafting route yourself."

Crafting, hunting and fighting doles out XP, which increases the related skills, and more RPG systems are coming, but there's no level system, which is designed

Pax Dei

RIGHT: Live a medieval fantasy life, gown, plaited hair and all. Just don't die of the Black Death.

BELOW: Crafting is a major part of the *Pax Dei* experience right now in Early Access.

Eventually *Pax Dei* will feature kingdoms to rule.

to encourage people to group up and work together, removing the barriers that levels create. You won't be stopped from playing with a friend because they are level 60 and you're level 1. "In *Pax Dei*, if we meet, I can join you, and you can just give me stuff and I can become part of the village," says Hardarson. "I'm immediately valuable to you because I have inventory, or I can do some healing spells rather quickly. I am a meaningful addition to your clan."

WAR IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS

This concept of everyone being valuable is clearest in the interplay between different roles and playstyles. So you might not be interested in PvP – which in its current form is quite limited, but will soon grow to encompass siege warfare and kingdoms fighting each other – but Haradarson notes that this doesn't mean you can't contribute, or won't be affected by the wars raging around you.

"Once the kingdoms go to war, that completely changes the demand in the economic system. All of a sudden, food prices are rising, the demand for food is going through the roof."

Concepts like knights, kingdoms and baronies will be coming over time, starting with knights, which will serve as the basis for the feudal system. Players will be able to swear allegiance to a knight, turning into their soldiers, ready to start causing a ruckus in PvP warfare.

FINDING RELIGION

Like the real medieval realms inspiring it, *Pax Dei*'s society isn't solely ruled by the nobility. Knights, barons and monarchs share power with the clergy. So players will be able to follow a religion, which itself is player-run, with chapels and churches and another hierarchical system.

Joining a parish will confer benefits like using churches to fast travel – *Pax Dei*'s worlds are big, and long journeys increase the likelihood of getting murdered by bears or bandits – as well as access to your parish's miracles. *Pax Dei* is a world where magic is real, where ghosts exist and people can cast spells. But unlike an MMO such as *World of Warcraft*, where you can roll a mage or a warlock and gain access to more spells simply by levelling up, *Pax Dei* isn't a linear journey – this stuff actually needs to be discovered.

"Everything is discovered in the world itself," says Hardarson. "You will find new magic, new skills, new recipes in the world; it's not part of a level unlock."

It sounds impressive, but right now these are ambitious plans rather than tangible features. It remains to be seen how it all comes together during Early Access. But I still saw some impressive things in the last alpha: particularly the architectural wonders erected by diligent players. *Pax Dei*'s low-fantasy realm is an incredibly striking place – a wilderness full of azure lakes, imposing mountains and moody forests tempting you to get lost inside them. And sprouting out of this landscape are all of these homes, villages and magnificent castles.

During the alpha, players had two plots they could place and build inside – in Early Access you'll have one, two or four, depending on what Founder's Pack you purchase – and individually they're quite small, giving you enough room to build a decent-sized house with a garden, or maybe a quaint inn. But, again, this is where other players come in.

"If you build next to someone, your common buildable area expands," CEO Thor Gunnarsson says as he takes me on a tour of a 40-person clan's settlement. "So it's sort of a soft incentive for people to band together and collaborate."

Watching early players interact with the system inspired the team to go a lot further with it, and hovering over a building in construction mode reveals just how many tiny components go into these structures. After managing to only build half of a small hovel, I was thoroughly impressed. And a bit jealous.

This is likely one of the first things new players will get stuck into first. After you've placed your simple camp and crafting stations, your next step is constructing your first home. And with Mainframe planning on making the Early Access crafting and building experience a bit faster, you should hopefully have your little house ready quicker than I did.

"We're hoping to build a world that we can all live in together for decades to come," says Gunnarsson. "And we take, of course, inspiration from the timelines and longevity of MMOs like *EVE* and *World of Warcraft* – both games that are now beyond their first two decades of live operations. That's something that we absolutely aspired to with *Pax Dei*."

Fraser Brown

CONCEPTS LIKE KNIGHTS, KINGDOMS AND BARONIES WILL BE COMING OVER TIME

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Winter 2024	Spiders	Nacon	spiders-games.com

GREEDFALL 2

Gunpowder fantasy goes forwards and back and upside down

Spare a thought for all the mid-budget RPGs set to release in the next few months. Launching a game in a genre as storied as this is hard at the best of times. Adding to it less than 12 months after it was shocked into the limelight by a universally beloved phenomenon feels faintly masochistic.

Though if *Baldur's Gate III* will inevitably stand as the yardstick to which all CRPGs are – fairly or unfairly – compared over the next several years, at least *GreedFall 2: The Dying World* seems to have inadvertently repositioned itself to court those fans wanting more of its party-based combat. This half-prequel, half-sequel to developer Spiders' 2019 gunpowder fantasy ditches its predecessor's middling action-RPG fights to raise the camera to a semi-bird's eye view for simultaneous turn-based brawls. It's more BioWare than Larian, admittedly, with all the action unfolding in real time, but a clear step towards the sort of tactical thinking that's long characterised the crunchier end of the CRPG spectrum.

PLAYED IT

Between hitting reptilian monsters in their pudgy faces and skewering human thugs, an active pause option lets you queue up your parties' next hammer swings, sword strikes and arrow volleys. The character skills available in my preview of the early game are limited, but hint at deep synergies to come. I'm able to spend from a limited pool of action points to instruct my starter companions to stun foes in knockback attacks, launch more powerful hits for big targeted damage and distract enemies away from ailing allies.

THE CHARACTER SKILLS AVAILABLE IN MY PREVIEW OF THE EARLY GAME ARE LIMITED

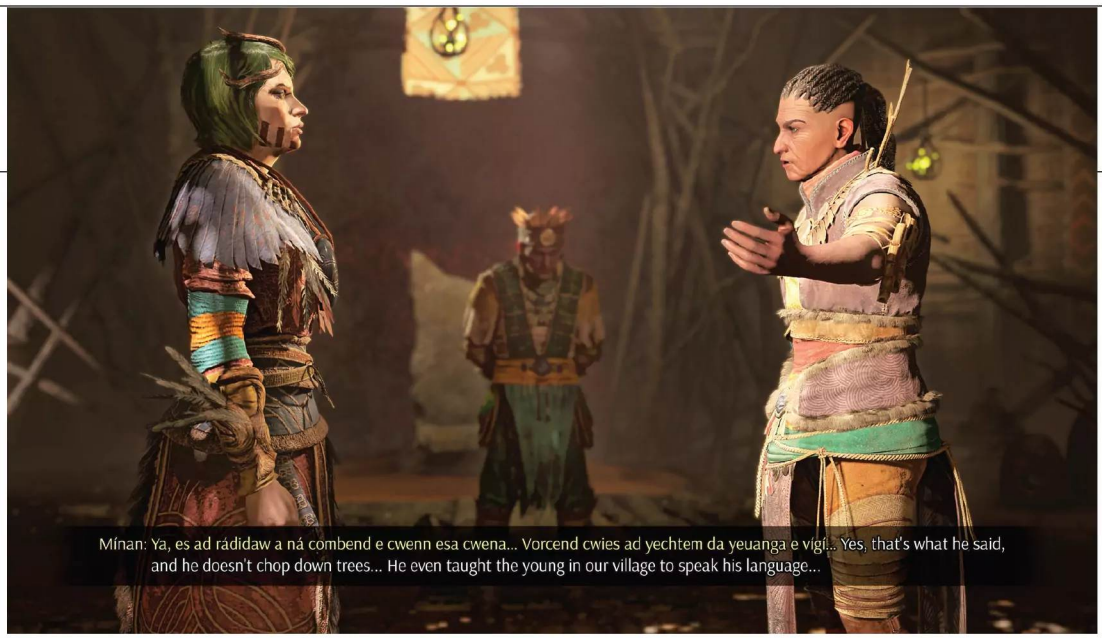
In other words, it's a world away from the hit-dodge-parry formula that the original *GreedFall* clung to. And when you add in the odd footprint-tracking segments whose visual breadcrumb trails smack of Geralt's Witcher senses, mountains of lore delivered through optional branching dialogue trees, and opportunities to complete quest lines by brute forcing your way through huddles of enemies, stealthing your way around them, or using your talents in Diplomacy to skill check your way out of danger without drawing blood, it soon becomes clear that *GreedFall 2* isn't just chasing what's in vogue but trying to hit all the tropes of the CRPG genre at once.

NEW BEGINNINGS

A little aspirational, maybe, but it seems a shrewd enough idea given the studio's past work. As Spiders co-founder Jehanne Rousseau explains, the original *GreedFall*'s two million unit sales was a mammoth success for the small studio, and has left the team room to tinker with broader ideas. Much of that has involved considering improvements that fans requested of the first game: fleshing out the lore, new settings that were only hinted at and better involving the player's party. "Having control over the group makes more sense for a lot of players who come to these kinds of games where you have a team and companions with stories between them," says Rousseau. "So the first thing was changing the system of combat."

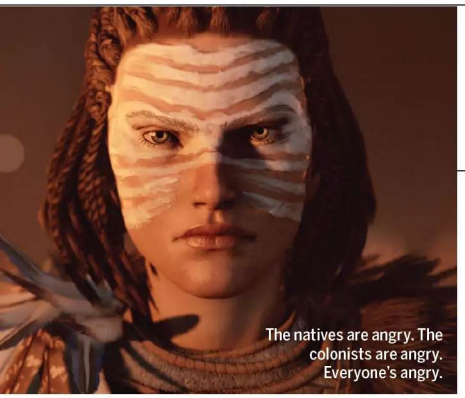
The second was to flip the script. Where *GreedFall* positioned you as a colonist arriving at the magical island of Teer Fradee in search of a cure to a disease blighting your people back home, this follow-up places you as a native of the island, soon kidnapped and transported to the colonisers' home continent. It's a part of the *GreedFall* world that loomed large in the first game but was largely absent from the player's journey.

As the story shifts geography, so too does it seem to be taking a darker turn. *GreedFall 2* wastes no time hopping into the tensions between colonists and natives, or hinting at the butchery many


Mínan: Ya, es ad rádidaw a ná combend e cwenn esa cwena... Vorcend cwies ad yechtem da yeuanga e vígí... Yes, that's what he said, and he doesn't chop down trees... He even taught the young in our village to speak his language...

RIGHT: The native Teer Fradee language is inspired from proto-Celtic.

BELOW: Our native home is one of the more serene tutorial areas we've passed through.



The natives are angry. The colonists are angry. Everyone's angry.

of the less trusting clanspeople expect could be just around the corner. For the benefit of our rather wet-behind-the-ears protagonist, it's all explained from the top. "What's really important to us in the *GreedFall* world is that you're playing someone that is discovering something new," says Rousseau. "You're exploring new cultures and new people, so by putting you in the shoes of a native from Teer Fradee, the continent is something that you will have to discover."

It's that new world, Rousseau reckons, that gives *GreedFall 2* its unique flavour, and from the game's opening moments, there's a sense that Spiders is betting big on the fictional setting to hook new and returning players. From the off, you're immediately thrust into a dialogue tree that offers as much exposition as you care to take, and the starting tutorial quest that charts your journey from regular tribesman to magically attuned sage is never short of optional snippets of lore. Even the majority of NPCs I meet throughout my preview speak in a fully voiced fictional language – as much a boast of the world building that Spiders has already put into the game as a demonstration of just how committed it is to throwing the player in headfirst.

What you'll find in that world is a place of warring, wicked, militarily advanced empires, many of which have obvious analogues in history. Cartels of traders seem to operate much as the rich merchant rulers of Amsterdam and Venice once did, and the smugly democratic empire with a lion on its coat of arms looks like a stand-in for the smugly democratic Britain of old.

Rousseau says she's already created 1,000 years of history to precede the events of *GreedFall 2*, covering the historical figures who shaped its world, the seven factions players will meet in the game, and the subgroups vying for power. Your job is to navigate their interests, and align yourself with whoever most appeals.

"We really wanted to offer a lot of choices that will be meaningful on the adventure, not only to have several different endings but really to offer a different journey," she says. The idea is to ground the game's otherwise intimidating body of lore in the personalities of your companions. With each belonging to a different faction, they can provide you with information that may change how you deal with an obstacle, or bring extra social weight to a pivotal encounter that could alter the course of events.

AT ONE POINT, I MEET A GROUP OF TRAPPERS CLEARING A FOREST OF ANIMALS

CLASH OF KINGS

Where the original *GreedFall* introduced the European-inspired colonial history that forms the backbone of its world, its intrigue and politicking it is more accentuated this time around. You're brought closer to the corridors of power, and don't just have the fate of Teer Fradee hanging in the palms of your hands, but the new world order. Little surprise, then, that Rousseau likens *GreedFall 2*'s flavour of historical fantasy to the politically charged stories of Game of Thrones author George R R Martin.

Not that there were many moments of my preview that dealt with those lofty ideas with much subtlety. At one point, I meet a group of trappers clearing a forest of animals that just so happen to be my tribe's regular source of food. One of my companions objects to their wanton destruction, and gets ready, I presume, to launch some choice insults at the colonial profiteers. But the only barb he can muster is a meek, "We need those animals too!" after which I'm given the option of settling the conflict through intimidation or steel. Not exactly the pointed ideological showdown I was hoping for.

Stilted dialogue, no doubt partly a consequence of *GreedFall 2*'s translation from French to English, occasionally lets down what should be dramatic moments such as these. Though I imagine this is just one of many areas that will improve in time. With *GreedFall 2* set to release into Steam Early Access in the coming months, Spiders hopes the extra community involvement will help iron out big development pivots.

It's an approach that studios like Larian and Supergiant have found huge success with. And as the scope of games becomes ever larger, and the costs to produce them spiral, might the Early Access model now be necessary to make an RPG the size of *GreedFall 2*? "Well, when you look at what happened with *Cyberpunk*, maybe they should have done Early Access," says Rousseau. "Now the game is wonderful, but when it was released it was not." Giving business tips to CD Projekt Red? Well, nobody can say the team at Spiders don't have their sights set high.

Callum Bains

ABOVE: Stealing from the dead is probably fine, right?

RIGHT: Sometimes trying to stay hidden is the best option.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
April 30, 2024 (Early Access)	Madfinger Games	Madfinger Games	grayzonewarfare.com

GRAY ZONE WARFARE

A new open-world take on the mil-sim extraction shooter genre

Jumping off a chopper in the middle of a jungle and instantly being screamed at to get into cover as bullets rain down from the tree line has typically been reserved for action movies or more linear games, but in *Gray Zone Warfare* this happens naturally and is as intense as it sounds.

Gray Zone Warfare straddles the line between hardcore military simulation and an extraction shooter. Once you are on the giant open-world map you can head out of your base on a chopper and back as much as you like, but you'll likely want to do that fairly often to make sure you don't lose the loot you have picked up or the items you need to complete your tasks. Or at least that's the way I like to play.

What makes *Gray Zone Warfare* special is that it really is an open military sandbox for you to play the game how you want. If you want to squad up and go on a mission that takes literal hours and sees you and your pals trek across the map to sneak up on other real players in enemy factions, you can. Or if like me you want to quickly get in and out of different locations grabbing as much loot as possible while quickly completing your next task and trying to avoid PvP in all but the most favourable situations, you can do that too.

PLAY THE WAY YOU WANT

"You know, you can really play it the way you want," said Rick Lagnese, PR and comms director at Madfinger Games. "You can play it with PvE, PvP or PvEvP you know, that's something we're doing that's kind of special. Play it the way you want."

FIGHTING IN FORESTS

Set on a fictional generally south-Asian-themed island there's a surprising variety of locations to fight through, from military bases to local towns and a lot of jungle and rice fields. Fights against other real players are the highlight of combat, especially when they can last a while with players respawning in base and rejoining the fight in minutes thanks to a quick chopper ride back to the action. But unlike a lot of similar games, the AI also puts up a real fight.

"In places like Tiger Bay, you're facing a military faction, so we have them even be a little bit more of a pain in the butt because, obviously, they're well trained, they even have different animations for shooting," says Lagnese. "So in the onboarding areas, the AI are criminals, they're not professionals, so they're not going to be on the same level. When you're facing more difficult enemies, we also have enemy AI behaviour so as they shoot you, they become confident, but the military factions are a beast."

PLAYED IT

AI DIFFICULTY

Thanks to varying levels of AI difficulty at different locations and systems that can make them more deadly the longer fights go on, you can often find yourself outgunned by a group of AI. This means that playing solo is difficult, and you'll likely want to team up with faction members before you head into the harder areas of the map. But, so far at least, this has proven easy even with complete strangers. As far as communities in multiplayer games go, *Gray Zone Warfare*'s is surprisingly nice.

With Lagnese revealing the game is currently only 30% complete in its early access form there is a lot still to come, but already *Gray Zone Warfare* has sunk its hooks into me thanks to the epic battles you can get into and the freedom to basically do whatever you want. When it reaches its final form, it could be truly special.

Mike Stubbs

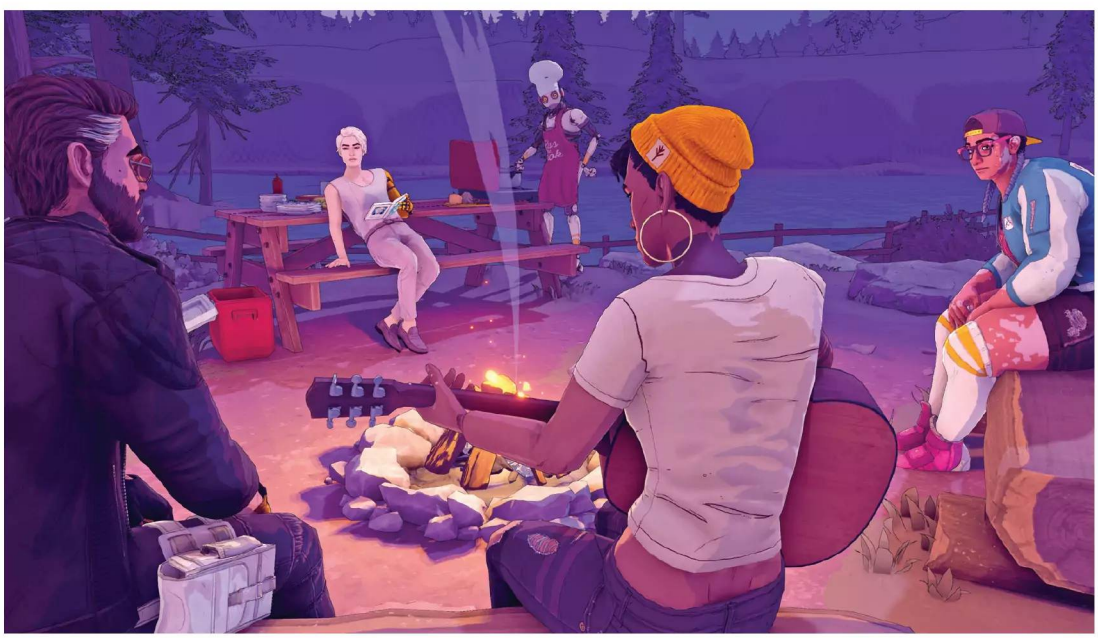
Combat is incredibly satisfying with kitted-out weapons.

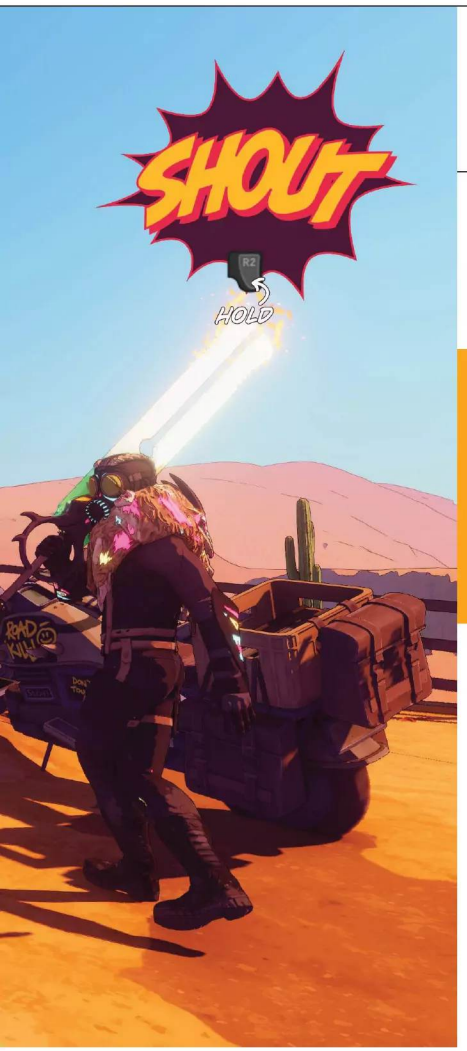
STRADDLES THE LINE BETWEEN MILITARY SIMULATION AND AN EXTRACTION SHOOTER

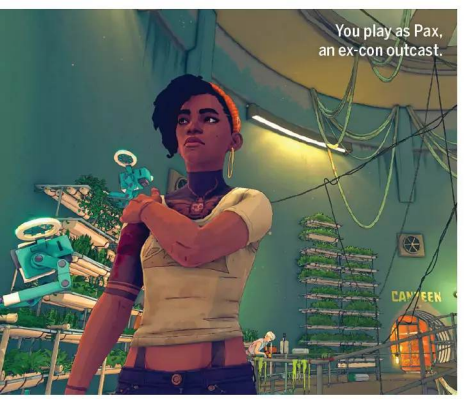
Dustborn

ABOVE: That's an, um, courageous look.

RIGHT: Chilling around the camp fire.







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
August 20, 2024	Red Thread Games	Spotlight by Quantic Dream	wearethedustborn.com

DUSTBORN

Let me smash fascists and flirt with my situationship

D*ustborn* is a narrative-driven, action-adventure road trip across a zany dystopian America. On the run in an alternate-history setting in which JFK wasn't the one who got shot and Silicon Valley seceded from the US, friends, lovers and found family go undercover as a punk band on tour to smuggle stolen secrets across the border.

Releasing August 20 on Xbox, PlayStation, and PC, *Dustborn* is Norwegian Studio Red Thread Game's first foray into action-adventure. And with cel-shaded comic book art and neon punk wardrobes, *Dustborn* invites much aesthetic comparison. But within these familiar trappings is a (pop) punk story about queers fighting cops and corporations exploiting workers.

Pax, a 30 something Black woman covered in tattoos, is the fulcrum of the party, joined by her artist best friend Sai, on-again off-again fling Noam, and long-lost sister Ziggy. A dad-like figure, Theo, heads up the smuggling operation, while a questionably sentient robot drives and cooks for the gang. They're also feared Anomals – who can harness the magical power of words after a mysterious event in the timeline's past.

You'll use these powers to beat up robots and bike gangs. Combat consists of basic melee combat with combos, blocks and rolls, but also the magical spoken word powers. These buffs and attacks are incorporated into the action through a snappy UI that slows time and keeps the action moving. And there's narrative dressing to it all too. When you fail to pull off a quick-time event for special moves you can hear Pax stumble over her words failing to come up with a good diss. One ability creates illusory flames to send enemies running.

COMBAT CONSISTS OF BASIC MELEE COMBAT WITH COMBOS, BLOCKS AND ROLLS

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Whether on the bus between stops or while exploring puzzle-filled destinations, Pax spends a lot of time talking to the party. There's emphasis on relationships being strained, rebuilt and reshaped across the journey, and my glimpse into how this takes shape after the party is established was promising. You'll be presented with different ways to solve problems that use different characters' abilities, but also change your relationships with them. While talking about an upcoming destination or brainstorming an obstacle you're prompted with multiple responses and solutions that will affect what a character thinks about you too, leading to one of multiple endings for each character.

PLAYED IT

My favourite bit of my preview was the campground at night after all the action. Walking around the fire to check on everyone, choosing which questions to ask, how to respond. To lean in towards Noam. To evade a question about my feelings. To pry. To show that I know each of my companions.

Beyond the mechanics of language as powerful spells and the allegorical layer of it all, what makes me most excited to see more of *Dustborn* is how its writers very clearly understand what power language has without any magic. What the party calls Anomals are branded 'deviants' by the state, and in the press preview mission, the party befriends a member of a Mad Max-like biker gang out in the neo-west who only knows people with his vocal powers as 'shoutmen'.

Adding everything up, *Dustborn* actually begins to feel like an RPG: the road trip, the party of strong, clashing personalities, the quest against an oppressive system. It doesn't have any gear customisation and the skill tree to upgrade Pax's bat is rudimentary, but it's got all the heart of a great RPG with strong interactive narrative systems on top.

Autumn Wright

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
August 20	ArenaNet	ArenaNet	guildwars2.com

GUILD WARS 2: JANTHIR WILDS

Make a house a Homestead with the new player housing feature

G*uild Wars 2*'s fifth expansion is checking off one of the biggest requests on the community's wishlist. Homesteads are a new player housing system, giving you a chance to own a slice of new territory, and decorate and customise it to your liking.

Homesteads bring a major overhaul to the decorations system currently used for guild halls. New options let you move, rotate and scale each decoration. You can float items into the air or clip them through the ground. You can even move items into each other, using them as smaller pieces of a larger build.

I was given access to a Homestead that one of the developers had started decorating. Its most prominent feature was a lighthouse they had constructed out of individual floor tiles, columns, arches and ramps. It's an impressive structure – far beyond anything that's currently possible in the game.

Once an item has been placed, a new modification menu lets you pick it back up and fine-tune it, using the same options as during initial placement. There are even a couple of advanced options, like setting the placement arrows to point in the direction of the map's global X and Y axes, or locally based on how the item itself is facing. It's a little overwhelming at first, but it wasn't long before I was utilising the full suite of tools to fine-tune my creations.

ArenaNet plans to port this expanded toolset over to the guild hall system too – but otherwise the two parts of the game will remain separate. You'll craft Homestead decorations not through the guild hall's scribing, but through a new crafting profession that's unlocked and upgraded through *Janthir Wilds*' masteries. The benefit here is the resource cost is much lower. From what I've seen, recipes require just a handful of low-level materials, as well as a new Homestead resource earned by converting wood, metals and plants.

ARENANET PLANS TO PORT THIS EXPANDED TOOLSET OVER TO THE GUILD HALL SYSTEM

PLAYED IT

NEAT FEATURES

If you're not the kind of player who's going to spend hours going all *Animal Crossing* on a piece of land, Homestead does have a couple of neat features to woo you. It acts as a showcase for your in-game collection of skins and cosmetics. Any alts that you leave in your Homestead will still be chilling there when you log in with another character. There's also a stable for your mounts to hang out – great news for anyone who's got a fancy Jackal skin that they rarely have an excuse to see. Even your skiff is docked in a little pier, with some fishing spots available along the river. Any of the home instance resource nodes that you've unlocked will carry across too.

A couple of new decorations also help show off your achievements. With an armour stand, you can make a statue of their character that inherits your current fit. And the weapon stand will let you display any weapon that you've earned. So if you've spent countless hours crafting legendary equipment, you can give it pride of place in your new home. Fashion is, after all, the real end game.

It's these extra touches that make Homesteads an exciting new addition for me. I'm looking forward to seeing some of the grand builds that players can make with the overhauled decorating system, but it's not something that I'm going to spend hundreds of hours doing myself. But between the mounts in my stable, the alts around my home and the chance to show off some in-game trophies, it feels like a much better personal space than what we've had before – a way to reflect on and celebrate the many, many things I've done in the game over the last decade and change.

Phil Savage

The armour stand is a cool way to show off your gear.

ABOVE: That lighthouse is made from different panels and tiles mashed together.

LEFT: I swear you can make better looking builds.

DOWN TO EARTH

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE WAR WITHIN forges a new path fuelled by a 20-year history

By Tyler Colp

You wouldn't know it from the outside of Blizzard's gated headquarters in Irvine, California, but inside its tinted glass doors the future is being written. This year, *WoW* turns 20, and *World of Warcraft*'s tenth expansion, *The War Within*, will honour that history as it takes a titanic step forward into a new era.

Just as I remember pulling the glossy *WoW* box off a Fry's Electronics shelf in 2005 and compelling my mother to buy it for me, the Blizzard developers responsible for making the MMO today remember their first experiences with it too. Almost every developer I speak to at Blizzard is transported out of the otherwise empty conference room as they recall their earliest memories from *WoW*.

"I think I first checked it out during stress test betas a couple of weeks before it came out," Ion Hazzikostas tells me of his origins with a game he now has the title of director on. "I had been a Blizzard fan all my life, from *Warcraft* to RTS [over] dial-up days – getting knocked offline when my parents picked up the phone."

ABOVE: The classic *Warcraft* feel is imbued in the Earthen cities.

MAIN: Several classic heroes return but they aren't the sole focus of the expansion.

Maria Hamilton, who is now an associate designer focused on *WoW*'s storytelling, met her husband in *Everquest*, the MMO before *WoW* made MMOs cool. "When *WoW* came out, we were in the beta," she says, pausing for a beat that contains an entire life's worth of memories too long for one conversation, "and it's just been a wild ride".

WoW's history is long, but the people in charge of its future have lived it and they know many of us have too. With *The War Within*, the first of a trilogy of expansions it's calling The Worldsoul Saga, the goal is to celebrate that deep relationship with the MMO that millions of players share with the developers at Blizzard. But it won't lean on only nostalgia – an often profitable but empty trend in so much media lately – to pull it off. *The War Within* will channel the heart of *Warcraft*, a fantasy world of orcs and humans set on the planet Azeroth, to spark an engine Blizzard hopes will drive it into a future unshackled from the expectations of most of its recent expansions. It will be joined by its sibling, *WoW Classic*, and a few experimental games aimed at stretching what's possible in

WHAT'S NEW

Major features in The War Within

DELVES
Short mini-dungeons to find and explore as you journey through Khaz Algar.

WARBANDS
Progression is available when you add characters to your Warband.

HERO TALENTS
New abilities are in a tree you complete by the end of the campaign.

DYNAMIC FLYING
Dragonflight's flying mount systems will return for all of Azeroth.

ANDUIN WILL START TO HEAL FROM THE TRAUMATIC EVENTS OF THE LAST EXPANSION

THE CREW

Who will be joining you?

ANDUIN WRYNN
The king of Stormwind is now older and still recovering from being under the Jailer's control.

ALLERIA WINDRUNNER
A void elf ranger-captain of Silvermoon who has seen her family taken from her.

JAINA PROUDMOORE
A powerful mage who you'll need to help prevent whatever Xal'atath is planning.

THRALL
The former Warchief of the Horde will be by your side for both wisdom and battle prowess.

ALLERIA AND XAL'ATATH WILL HAVE A UNIQUE RIVALRY IN THE WAR WITHIN

Warcraft. Blizzard has been cooking, and it's about to pull the lid off of a delicious next few years.

SHARPENING THE KNIFE

Fear of the unknown, even when that unknown is the face of the expansion, lets *The War Within* bring the mystery back to *WoW*. As a kid, I'd read about *Warcraft* lore with the game running, swapping between a wiki and my idle undead warlock standing in the location of some climactic battle that shaped Azeroth's past. This was long before the MMO mined much of its history to make each new expansion threatening on an Avengers-level scale.

Some of it ruled: in 2007's *The Burning Crusade*, Illidan's Black Temple loomed in Shadowmoon Valley where you'd eventually get to fight The Betrayer himself, and in 2016, ghastly demons razed Azeroth before a final confrontation with their leader in *Legion*. *Warcraft*'s history was rich with legendary villains, like the Lich King on his frozen throne, but the desire to raise the stakes to match their threat caused *WoW* to flinch in 2020 with *Shadowlands*, an overwrought expansion that lost sight of what makes *Warcraft* stories fun.

Dragonflight, the most recent expansion, was meant to hit the reset button after *Shadowlands* and, by most accounts, it pulled it off. When I ask Maria Hamilton if she thinks Blizzard has earned that trust back, she seems confident that it has. "One of the things we changed and made a point of changing philosophically was how we approached player feedback as a team," she said. "We want to hear you, we know this is your game, too."

If box art were still a thing, *The War Within*'s would have four heroes of *Warcraft*, including Thrall, Jaina Proudmoore, Anduin Wrynn and Alleria Windrunner, standing under a sinister purple elf emerging out of a black, starlit sky like a cosmic puppeteer. But we don't have box art these days, so the key art will have to do. The elf's name is Xal'atath and she's going to make *WoW* feel like *WoW* again, Hamilton said, while being careful not to spoil where her story is headed.

She's no Lich King, but that's the point. *WoW* villains shouldn't have to compete with who came before and Hamilton says the team is being careful to keep the story grounded. Xal'atath began as an entity bound to an ancient dagger for shadow priest players during *Legion* and eventually escaped after seizing an opportunity to make a deal with an old god, one of several parasitic alien beasts who exist to poison every planet in existence. An elf on speaking terms with one of these eldritch horrors can't be good, right? "[She's] a different kind of character, where her motives are largely kind of confusing," Hamilton says. Blizzard wants the mystery of Xal'atath to lure you through *The War Within* so you can experience all the other things going on.

ABOVE: Hallowall's crystal changes colours based on the time of day.

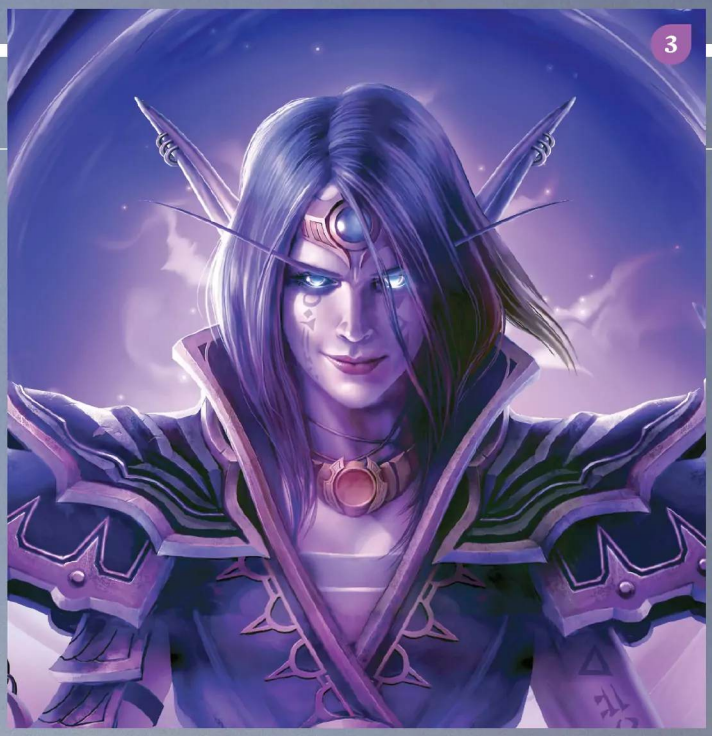
MAIN: The Arathi people finally make an appearance in *WoW*.

It is made clear to me over the course of my conversations with *The War Within*'s lead developers that the story is the backbone of not only this new expansion, but the entire trilogy. The team has never been able to develop a story arc with an ending planned this far in advance. The threads that start in *The War Within* will continue into *Midnight*, the second expansion, and end in *The Last Titan*, the third, and everything in between will follow the team's lead.

DIGGING IN

Most of *The War Within* will take place underground, and Tina Wang, associate art director on the

World of Warcraft: The War Within



1 You will explore a vast Nerubian empire and battle those under the command of Xal'atath.

2 Even the creatures you find in Hallowfall will be changed based on the crystal's light.

3 It's going to take more than an army to stop Xal'atah, thanks to her access to the void.

4 The Earthen mines make *The War Within* feel like classic *Warcraft*.

5 Players will be able to customise a lot with their Earthen, including their crystals.

6 Female Earthen can have beards!

7 The Isle of Dorn is also home of the new capital city, Dornogal.

expansion, isn't afraid of what some could see as a risk. Any time *WoW* has had underground zones, players will beg to see the sky again. "One big piece we really leaned into was making sure that a lot of the zones still had areas that felt very lush," Wang says. And they do: Hallowfall, the home of a Nerubian empire, *WoW*'s oldest race of sentient bugs, feels like a lot of familiar *WoW* zones to quest in. There are pools of water, patches of tall grass and pockets of friendly settlements all under a giant crystal filling the sky with purple or gold based on the time of day. "We have ways of hooking up things so that when the crystal changes, it also pairs with environment lighting, fog and atmosphere changes."

The home of *WoW*'s newest playable race, the Earthen, is a mix of old dwarven architecture and grassy plains. The Isle of Dorn is where you start *The War Within*'s campaign, before plunging deep into the underground zones, and it's where a race of old, old stone dwarves have lived for thousands of years. Wang says the art team wants to reflect their culture, where some dwarves remain stewards of Azeroth while others wish to break free of their original edict, by adding details like the ale they drink and the beads and braids that decorate their beards.

The few hours I spend with *The War Within* in its alpha reinforce the grounded story Blizzard wants to tell and how everything else works off of that foundation. As someone who grew up and put a lot of time into *WoW*, playing through the new zones actually does feel a bit like coming home, a sentiment executive creative director Chris Metzen pitched to a BlizzCon audience last year. But at the same time, it feels reinvigorated for people like me, adults who have endured the last few years in the real world and want to inhabit a universe that doesn't just echo what came before, but channels that old passion to make *WoW* a magical place to be again.

WARCRAFT FOR EVERYONE

You can always go back whenever you want. *WoW Classic* recently entered its *Cataclysm* era, recreating the expansion in which a dragon torches Azeroth and leaves it in a state that you can still see in the live version of the game today. *WoW Classic*, and the way players rushed to play a 20-year-old game, taught Blizzard a lot about what had changed over those years.

Talent trees, for example, returned to the live version of *WoW* because, as Hazzikostas tells me, it was clear players wanted more granular decisions about their characters. "Playing *Classic* ourselves and seeing reactions to those original [talent] trees confirmed for us that our instincts and the direction we were going were sound, and that we had in fact lost something." So Blizzard brought back talent trees, giving players a ton of ways to augment their skills, and with *The War Within*, everyone will get to choose new Hero Talents too.

Season of Discovery, a *WoW Classic* spin-off mode that chops the old world up into distinct, seasonal chunks, is proof that the MMO can serve more than just players who want to spend a lifetime on one character. Dungeons that were once for levelling have been transformed

THE CINEMATIC HINTS AT SOMETHING LOOMING DEEP WITHIN THE PLANET AZEROTH

XAL'ATATH REMAINS A MYSTERY THAT YOU'LL UNPACK OVER THE COURSE OF THE CAMPAIGN

into raids and every class can find runes in the world that give them powerful new abilities. It's a revitalisation of the original game, and it's that kind of sensibility that lines up with the shift the developers were explaining to me: players want more *WoW* and Blizzard is going to give it to them.

That includes Plunderstorm, a limited-time battle royale mode, and a reprise of the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion called *WoW* Remix. Both modes were a success, Blizzard tells me, especially given that the studio has never done anything remotely as transformative to *World of Warcraft*.

What it meant to be a *WoW* player five years ago is drastically different from what it means now, and I think that's a good thing. I get the urge to jump back in every now and then, and it's much easier to do that knowing that I don't necessarily have to commit to a new character or be forced to relearn how my old ones work. It's now possible to raise a character to the level cap with rudimentary gear for raiding with a paid character boost.

FOR AZEROTH

WoW hasn't been on my mind as much as it was when I was in high school and neglecting homework on raid nights. The hours and hours I used to spend running raids and dungeons and gathering crafting materials have gone to other things. But after speaking with the team at Blizzard, it's clear that a lot has changed on the development side. Instead of trying desperately to hold on to people like me through various callbacks and improvements to the game – which obviously have their positives – Blizzard is looking at how people play its games and putting more effort than ever before into shaping the experience around that.

Blizzard has had a rocky last few years that have made it hard to trust how much has actually changed internally, but from what I've seen, it's quite a lot. The excitement was contagious and it genuinely felt like I was speaking to the players of the game as much as I was speaking to the creators of it.

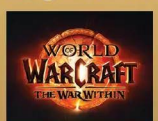
And *WoW* is better for it. A game without enthusiastic developers often shows that lack of passion in the final version. *The War Within* is a new beginning built on a foundation of love for *Warcraft*, the past 20 years, and a confidence for where it's going next. And I think it's about time to go home again. ■

ABOVE: Huge amounts of detail went into making Khaz Algor feel lived-in.

THE FUTURE OF WOW

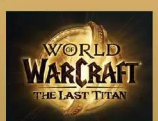
Looking ahead at the Worldsoul saga

DRAGONFLIGHT
Dragonflight let players return to Azeroth to ease up on the pacing before *The War Within*.



THE WAR WITHIN
Xal'atath and her army of Nerubians threaten the planet and the Earthen are here to help.

MIDNIGHT
In *Midnight*, players will return to the home of the elves and fight off the void.



THE LAST TITAN
Players will solve an ancient conspiracy that connects with the history of the planet.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

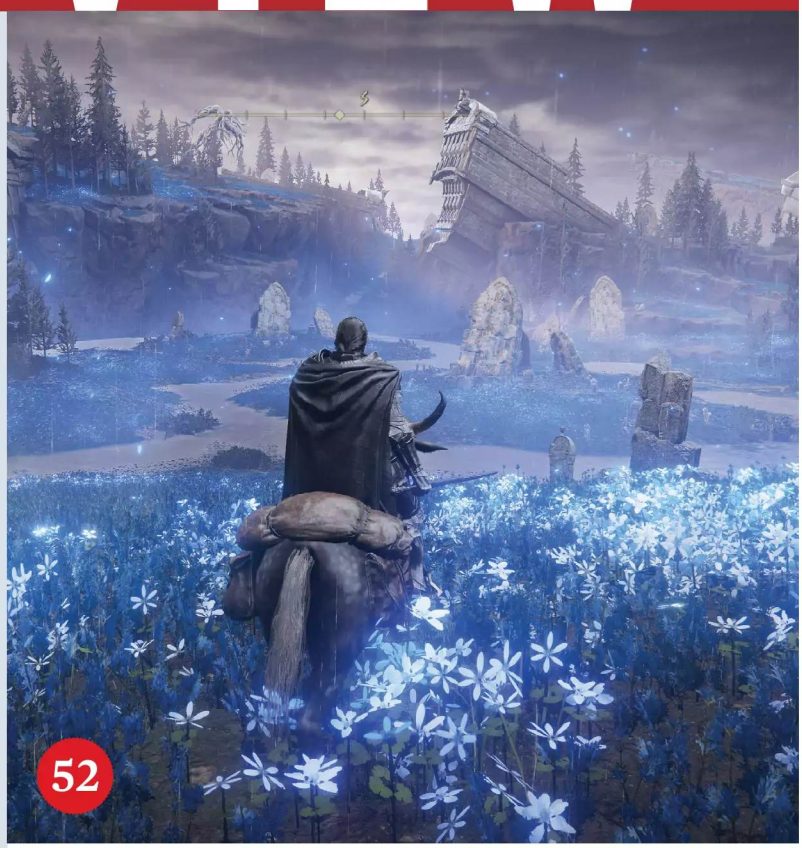
90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

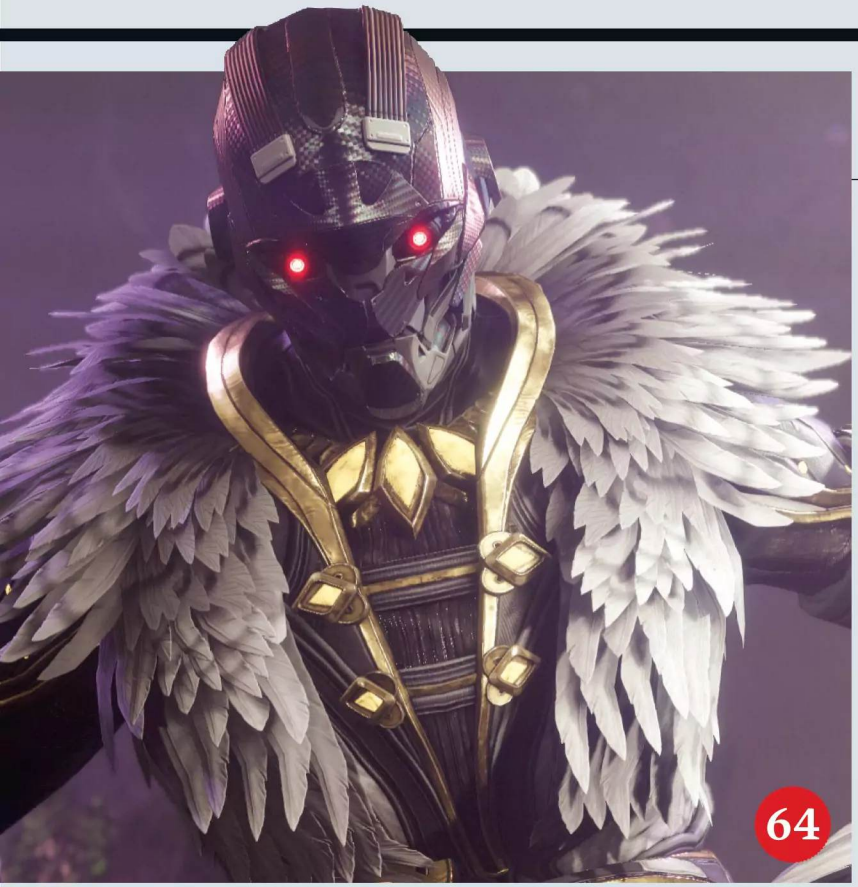
The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

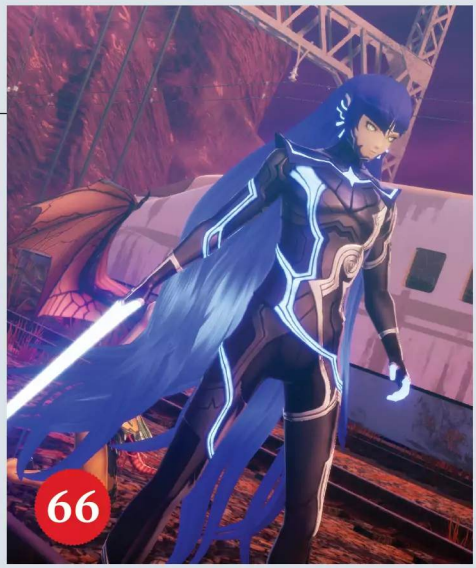


Running rings

So *Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree* is now here and, as our ridiculously high-scoring review of the game shows this issue, it's an absolute must-play. Further more, it shows how its dev, FromSoftware, continues to run rings around its opposition in the action-RPG genre. At the end of the day, there's most Soulslikes, and then there's *Elden Ring*, and *Shadow of the Erdtree* really takes the game to wondrously dark and engaging new heights.

Elsewhere, we're really enthused to see that the dark narrative horror adventure, Still Wakes the Deep, is as good as it looked in preview. The artistry on show from its dev, The Chinese Room, is palpable in every facet of the game, which while short, is well-written, smartly paced and has a disturbingly beautiful atmosphere.





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FREE GAMES

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75 **Daymare Cat**
75 Agujero

This month's Tarnished reviewers...

TYLER COLP
Specialist in Angering crones
Currently playing *Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree*
This month Was called a villain by a crone. And in *Shadow of the Erdtree* he...

JUSTIN TOWELL
Specialist in Losing races
Currently playing *F1 24*
This month Challenged Max Verstappen to a race around the world in 80 days..

ROBIN VALENTINE
Specialist in Wearing capes
Currently playing *Capes*
This month Contrary to the advice of Edna Mode, wore a series of colourful capes around town.

PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in Chasing destiny
Currently playing *Destiny 2: The Final Shape*
This month Finally witnessed The Witness, who in turn had witnessed him.

KERRY BRUNSKILL
Specialist in Seeking vengence
Currently playing *Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengence*
This month Traded insults with a giant mothman called Jeff. He's alright really.

ABSOLUTELY DIVINE

SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE masterfully concludes FromSoftware's glorious action RPG

By Tyler Colp

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree is a staggering expansion, not only for its massive size – it's about as big as half of the original map – but for all the ways it challenges the assumptions I had about the nature of its world and the limits of an open world narrative. It complements the base game in unexpected ways that make for one of the most impressive send-offs I've ever seen.

SotE rivals *Dark Souls* with a corkscrew world design layered with wondrous and horrific secrets to discover. FromSoftware has perfected its command over creating a dark fantasy world layered with history and details that cement *Elden Ring* as one of the most creative and satisfying action RPGs ever made. Old enemies return in new contexts, new weapon and spell types stretch your approach to combat with acrobatic animations and potent synergies with existing items, and new characters come to blur the morality of major figures we've spent hundreds of hours learning about. *Shadow of the Erdtree*'s storytelling is so masterfully embedded into the fabric of everything you see and do that it's practically elemental.

The gnarled tree at the centre of the Land of Shadow, a shrouded counterpart to the golden plains of the Lands Between, anchors you to the anguish of *SotE*, inescapable no matter where you go. Razed by the Golden Order long before your Tarnished shows up, the Land of Shadow is an ancient, festering wound that won't heal. In the first major dungeon, a blind old woman – who mirrors the Finger Reader crone that proclaims you Elden Lord in the original game – calls you a villain and asks if the years of bloodshed weren't enough. Even if you don't consider yourself an oppressor, to her, being a grace-touched Tarnished makes you complicit in the atrocities committed by Messmer and the Golden Order.

The Land of Shadow is a festering wound that won't heal

She returns later to awaken *SotE*'s first major boss, a group of dancers wearing a ceremonial lion costume. The fight against this swirling mass of hair and horns is more overwhelming than some of the *Elden Ring*'s late-game battles. The room is showered in lightning and icicles, setting a precedent for every major fight to come.

LORE DROP *The major players in SotE*

MIQUELLA
A demigod who has spent his life trying to save the downtrodden despite his implicit role in their subjugation.

MARIKA
Queen of the Lands Between who birthed a religious order and then decides to end it by shattering the Elden Ring.

LADY LEDA
A devoted knight of Miquella who welcomes you into the Land of Shadow with no patience for doubt.

THE ERDTREE
A golden tree at the centre of the Lands Between and an object of faith with secrets hidden in its shadow.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A massive open world action RPG expansion set in a dark fantasy world

EXPECT TO PAY
$59.95

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

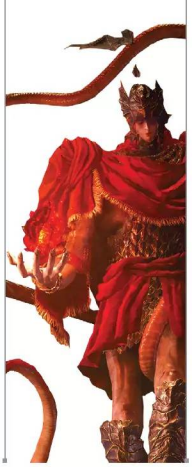
PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 12900K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3XqDV1S

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

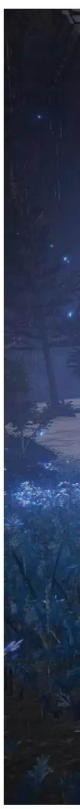


A dual-wielding sorcerer who attacks with a fury no boss in the base game could match. An old dragon rises into the sky and blankets the arena in apocalyptic storms. Even against minor bosses in *SotE*'s dungeons, the spectacle is as dazzling as it is terrifying. FromSoft repeatedly bends the typical crescendo of a boss fight to communicate something new about your opponent, whether that's a monstrous transformation or the fleeting energy of an opponent who has already lost.

FromSoft revitalises its boss encounters with creative counters to habits formed from playing *Elden Ring*, nudging you to either fully invest in your chosen playstyle or mould your build around these dramatic new fights – fans of the Meteorite spell, for example, will need to accommodate bosses who can't be knocked out of dangerous attacks. I found myself too sluggish when sticking with the two-handed mace I walked into the DLC with, but saying goodbye to it led to me falling in love with some of the new weapons, like the throwing daggers that magically rematerialise in my hand. In a flexible spellcaster build, they complemented faster (but weaker) spells.

WEAPON OF CHOICE

You'll need to adapt because combat encounters constantly deny old tricks, like a catacomb dungeon that brings back *Bloodborne*'s dreaded Frenzy debuff to force you to run straight into the unknown or risk instant death. FromSoft has also invented a new, somehow worse, type of bird that will pester you everywhere you go like horse-sized mosquitos on a camping trip. Even the hand spiders return after nobody asked them to – get ready for the dread of running through a field full of them lying in wait. Almost everything you hated having to deal with in *Elden Ring* is back in a way that feels like a middle finger from FromSoft, followed by a



ABOVE: Major characters in the original game are revealed to have horrific origins.

FAR LEFT: Some enemies will only take meaningful damage if you find their weak spot.

SotE rivals the beauty of some of the original game's environments.

Don't let this ceremonial lion costume fool you: it's a surprisingly tough boss.

RIGHT: New dungeon types are lined with secrets and ambushes.

FAR RIGHT: The bosses are stronger and weirder, and mimic some of the ones found in the base game.

The Land of Shadow will take you close to 100 hours to thoroughly explore.

confident handshake signalling that you willingly signed up for this and will actually enjoy every minute of it.

Weapons like the new great katanas push *Elden Ring*'s rhythmic combat into new directions. Upgrade materials are abundant enough that it's not a chore to give them, and the many other new weapons, a shot. I would've never thought FromSoft would let me leap into the air and spin kick a giant scorpion to death at a speed that could work in faster action games like *Devil May Cry*, but it absolutely does with the new martial arts weapons.

These weapons, and some of the newer movement-based spells, show that FromSoft has the chops to innovate on a combat style it made synonymous with the Soulslike and shift it into a gear that competes with the best action games out there. The backhand blades were my favourite: they supercharge the age-old trick of circling around gigantic enemies with a skill that lets you dash behind them at the same speed as a regular dodge roll.

But for every old trick in *SotE* there's a devious new counter: some enemies, like the new Fire Knights, are too smart for this and will fling out delayed magical attacks in a circle around them. They'd catch me mid-swing every single time. Other enemies, like the furnace golems, don't take meaningful damage until you find a way to expose their weak spot, which adds a satisfying wrinkle to mounted combat.

IN PLAIN SIGHT

From the very start you can see poison swamps and castles begging to be explored, but with no clear way to get to them. Deep ravines and lakes block your way, funnelling you into the caves or a new dungeon. Some paths are dead ends, but a surprising number open up into vast sections of the map you've never seen before, like an area blanketed in bright blue flowers that was tucked just underneath a ridge in the game's opening region.

Most of these parts of the map can be accessed from multiple directions if you know where to look, intensifying the DLC's dreamlike quality: it feels like there are entire realms to explore lurking right outside your field of view.

Every time I return to the beginning of the game, I'm amazed at how considered the construction of the world is, carefully built to preserve its deepest mysteries while still letting you get a glimpse of what's to come. *SotE*'s smaller map doesn't limit the expansiveness you'd expect out of *Elden Ring*, it just reorients it in another direction, where ladders send you into hidden ruins and elevators take you into forests on stone pillars reaching into the sky.

For every old trick in SotE there's a devious new counter

The payoff for your occasionally gruelling path through *SotE* are dozens of secrets and gorgeous views to stumble into. I once got lost trying to avoid those hand spiders and fled to the nearest site of grace that happened to be overlooking a field of massive stone structures – which are instantly recognisable to anyone who played *Elden Ring* – sprouting out of the ground. It was like taking the elevator down into Siofra River for the first time again, but heightened with the gut-punch of those familiar shapes. *SotE* does this again and again, teasing you with a captivating view of the corpse of a dragon lying in a pool of blood-red flowers or the fading silhouette of a tower piercing through a golden sky. If *Elden Ring* was like exploring a pristine painting, *SotE* is like that same painting after it's been dunked in alcohol; the colours are smeared and fleeting, but its beauty endures.

Shadow of the Erdtree refuses to let you look away from the point it's trying to make about the hypocrisy of the Lands Between. Even when you're galloping through its ruins and an arrow sends you flying off your horse like you're in an episode of Jackass, the hostility cuts deeper when you know no hero could save this place, its fractured reflection. FromSoft is careful not to badger you about morality and lets the slapstick humour of death provide levity, but *SotE* contrasts your ascent to Elden Lord with a grotesque tour of the bodies buried underneath the throne.

SotE's new characters also call back to the original campaign, widening your perspective of figures now lost to history. Freyja is a woman who fought alongside Radahn, Ansbach has an allegiance to Mohg, a demigod you're required to kill to even enter the DLC. One initially heroic character asks you to lend a hand in a series of betrayals that make Lautrec in *Dark Souls* look like a level-headed guy.

Elden Ring already contained FromSoft's most ambitious challenges and themes, and *SotE* is obviously essential for fans who want more of it. But the ways the DLC deliberately mimics the original game elevate it from a simple epilogue to a clear thesis on what *Elden Ring* has always been about, no matter how much dialogue you skipped. It wields these familiar things to satisfy all the sickos that have been created since *Demon's Souls*. And then, in a few late-game moments, pushes it all aside to look you in the eyes and make it clear what it's getting at.

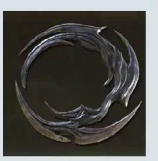
It's a stunning achievement that reminds me why I fell in love with FromSoft's games in the first place and why this studio remains unparalleled in creating eclectic worlds time and time again. ■

WEAPON SPECIALIST

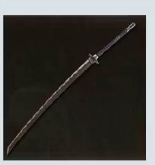
SotE's new weapon types

BACKHAND BLADE
Swords with a skill that lets you dodge behind enemies.

SMITHSCRIPT DAGGER
Throwing daggers with unlimited ammunition.



CURSEBLADE'S CIRQUE
Devastating blades with an acrobatic skill.



GREAT KATANA
Like a katana but bigger and meaner. Attack speed is decreased though.

ANVIL HAMMER
A massive weapon that can slam into the ground and cause an explosion.

CHILLING PERFUME BOTTLE
A great off-hand weapon for applying chill to enemies.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

FromSoftware is unparalleled in creating captivating battles, gorgeous set pieces and impeccable storytelling.

95

SPANDEXCOM

CAPES turns superhero combat into a brain-twisting tactical puzzle

By Robin Valentine

All the best superhero teams have one thing in common: everyone has their role. While Wolverine's charging in, claws flashing, Cyclops is up on a ridge shooting down lasers, and Colossus is body-blocking energy blasts. That's what your squad of superheroes feels like in *Capes* as you're directing them in turn-based battles. From teleporter Rebound to psychic Mindfire to speedster Mercurial, each character is wonderfully distinct, and securing victory means combining their unique powers to enhance their strengths and cover their weaknesses.

The Capes are not quite your typical superheroes, however. They're based in King City, a dystopian near-future metropolis that's been ruled by a team of supervillains for decades. Your crew is less like a classic crime-fighting team, and more like a cell of young supers fighting back against the oppressive regime.

The path to revolution consists of a series of story-driven turn-based strategy missions – always a punch-up of some kind, but often with a twist, such as stealth elements, a race against time, or civilians in need of protection. They're not easy – it's the kind of game where when you first load up a mission and see an absolute horde of enemies arrayed against you, it's natural to think, "How is this even possible?" Half an hour later, after several attempts, you finally stand surrounded by defeated thugs thinking, "How did I pull that off?"

> **"Between missions heroes can enhance their abilities back at base"**

The key to victory is always in getting the most out of every member of your team. Their identities are extreme by design. Facet, for example, clad in crystal armour, can take assault rifle bursts without flinching, whereas Rebound can be downed with just a few punches – but Rebound's ability to teleport gives her mobility unlike anyone else on the team, and her backstab attacks do enormous damage. When they're together, Facet's abilities become a toolset for keeping her out of trouble – taunting foes and protecting her with crystal shields keeps her safe enough to get in position to strike.

With eight heroes available to unlock (you'll usually choose four to bring into each mission), and increasingly dangerous enemies arrayed against you, the web of possible combos becomes a wonderfully layered combat puzzle. All sorts of complimentary mechanics add to your options. Team Ups, for example, let heroes directly combine their powers if they're physically close enough, unlocking new versions of abilities. Use Mercurial's Dash while she's near the pyrokinetic Ignis and she'll leave a trail of flame behind her; backstab a target with Rebound when Mindfire's close and he'll mind control them into turning around to ensure she deals maximum damage.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based strategy game about superheroes rebelling against a dystopian regime

EXPECT TO PAY
$44.99

DEVELOPER
Spitfire Interactive

PUBLISHER
Daedalic Entertainment

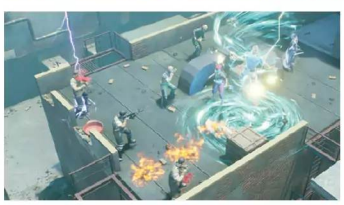
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
spitfire interactive.com.au

SUPED UP

Between missions, heroes can enhance their abilities back at base, but crucially these upgrades never flatten the differences between the characters. Rebound, for example, has three health – no matter how



ABOVE: Weathervane builds his Ultimate by hitting foes with chain lightning, then unleashes a devastating storm when fully charged.

In King City, superpowers are outlawed, and anyone who shows signs of having them is rounded up for a grisly fate.

TOP: Every now and then the game shrugs and just throws 50 guys at you, and honestly it rules.

FAR RIGHT: The stiff character models get way too much close up time in the cutscenes.

good she gets at teleporting and takedowns, she will never get any tougher. That means that she's only a couple of blows away from death from the start of the game right to the end, keeping her hit-and-run playstyle intact throughout.

Great pacing helps – when you're feeling a little frazzled after a particularly complicated boss fight or a careful stealth mission, that's when the game will throw you a big dumb fight against a horde and let you unleash satisfying havoc on them.

Where the pacing unfortunately isn't quite as deft is in the story. There are a lot of cutscenes in *Capes*, but very few of them go anywhere.

Honestly, it's not the story that pulls you along – it's the depth of strategy on offer. The drama isn't in the cutscenes, it's in every nail-biting turn as you try and figure out the perfect combo. It can be a challenge – if you're the kind of person who hates the idea of reloading the same mission multiple times looking for the right approach, this probably isn't for you. But meet it on its own terms and *Capes* will give you 20-30 hours of wonderfully substantial and engrossing superhero strategy. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Every hero has their unique super-strengths in this wonderfully intense turn-based strategy game.

80

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

The many layers of Capes' combat system

1 DISARM Some abilities can inflict disarm, and it's used in all sorts of interesting ways.

2 ULTIMATE Each hero has a different way of charging Ultimate energy.

3 ENVIRONMENT Some abilities can push or pull enemies. You can use that by forcing enemies into explosive barrels.

STARTING TO FLAG

Another odd in-betweener year for F1 24

By Justin Towell

Last year's *F1 23* was great because it offered three compelling single-player pillars, including the lavishly-produced, Drive To Survive-esque story mode. Take that away, in the now-predictable two-year cycle for such major features, and you're left with something that really does invite the question of whether it could have just been DLC instead, despite a new emphasis on assuming the role of real drivers.

Without the story mode, there's a definite feeling of having done this before. Even the supposedly all-new career mode is predictable. Will we start the new weekend with a practice session in which we fulfil three R&D tasks? Yes, we will. What was once an innovative and enjoyable practice session which taught you the track and how to play the game is now some seven years old and overly-familiar. Sure, you can skip the practice targets using the 'simulate practice' option, which is a sort-of-fun minigame of risk, reward and quick thinking as you balance time left with percentage chances of failing the task, but if you're skipping the part of the game where you play it, why did you buy it?

You bought it for the racing, of course. And in that respect at least, it's still very good. Fast, responsive driving on all the real tracks, including four that have been entirely remodelled. The handling has been tweaked and feels a touch lighter than last year's game. Max Verstappen himself has apparently helped Codemasters tweak the handling to make it more realistic, which is probably why it feels so smooth and driveable. Unfortunately, the rest of the gameplay is less polished than we've come to expect.

The handling has been tweaked and feels a touch lighter

Cars still exhibit a tendency to turn in on you even when you're clearly alongside at the apex, but now the difficulty balancing seems a little off, with cars suddenly displaying way more pace than you even though you've got a decently-charged ERS battery and the AI difficulty level's at the top end of medium.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest instalment in Codemasters' long-running series of official Formula One games

EXPECT TO PAY
$99.95

DEVELOPER
Codemasters

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
ea.com

RADIO GA GA

You soon settle back into the cat-and-mouse play of longer Grands Prix. But absolutely destroying your zen-like state is your race engineer, who seems to have been at the ethanol. "Your tyres are looking too hot," he barks as you literally turn the first few corners after putting them on the car. "Cool them down." But he's told you as you enter a fast corner and tells you you've failed within seconds. Thanks. But that's not all. Better still, "Your lap times are a bit erratic," when you've been mega consistent but stopped for tyres a lap ago. That does tend to affect the lap times, mate. He also likes to set you an arbitrary lap time to beat during race sessions that's some two seconds slower than every lap you've done so far. He's a complete idiot.

Also an idiot is whoever is in charge of tyres. If you've got it set to One Shot qualifying and it rains, it appears to be impossible to fit wet weather tyres, causing you to go out on slicks, unable to do anything except slide off the track.

The result of all this idiocy is an uncharacteristically messy experience. It doesn't matter so much if you enjoy going from last to first, Jenson Button style, but it will certainly irk the more serious F1 fans. The great thing about the series in recent years is that it's simply become more polished with every entry. But it does feel like the attention to detail is slipping. "Lando Norris – at last a winner in Formula One!" is great scripting, well-voiced by the real Sky Sports commentator, David Croft. But it isn't so hot when Lando already won two races ago.

TAYLOR'S VERSION

But why should you care about performing busywork micro-quests mid-GP anyway? It's all about reputation. Career mode's focus is now on your own rep as a driver, within the team and compared to your rivals. This starts with you

ICONS OF THEIR SPORT

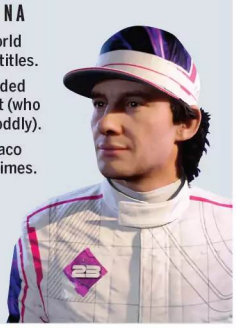
F1 24 allows you to play career mode as several famous drivers

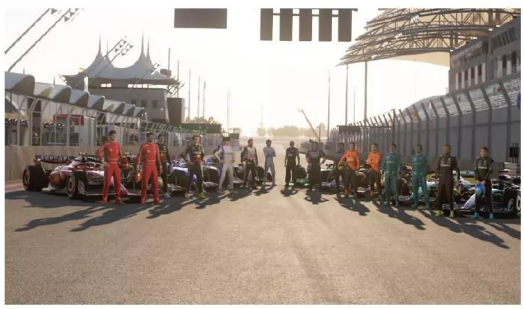
JAMES HUNT

- World champion in 1976.
- Beat Niki Lauda in the year of Lauda's horrific crash.
- Was later a commentator for the BBC alongside Murray Walker.
- Subject of the film Rush.

AYRTON SENNA

- Won three World Championship titles.
- Famously feuded with Alain Prost (who isn't playable, oddly).
- Won the Monaco Grand Prix six times.
- Iconic in his yellow helmet and red and white McLaren.



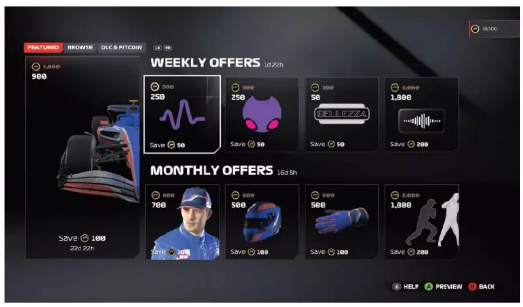


Locked brakes damage your tyres but can force a pass.

ABOVE: Most of the likenesses are really good, especially Verstappen here.

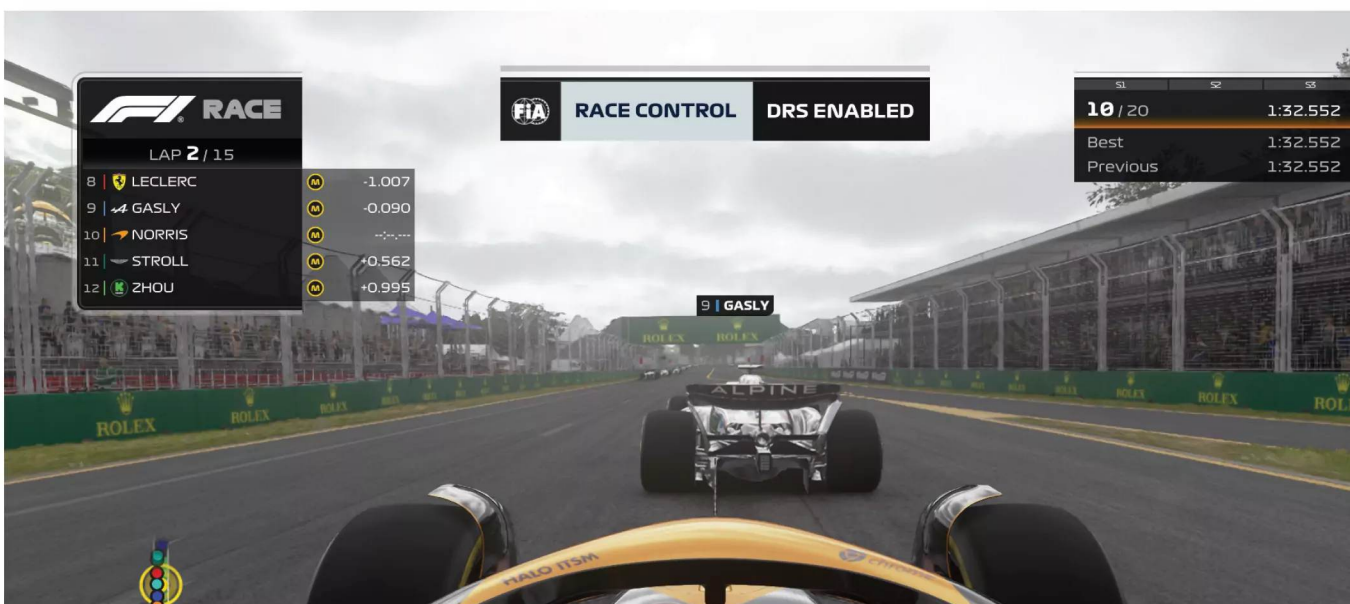
BELOW: The game shows you little icons above your current rivals.

2ND
Sergio PÉREZ
Red Bull
Plenty to talk about when it comes to Max Verstappen. At the moment he's on our screen. So let's talk Max.



FAR RIGHT: The AI left a wheel in and soared over like a plane.

BELOW: Teams and drivers can be represented in online leagues.


RACE
LAP 2 / 15
8 | LECLERC -1.007
9 | GASLY -0.090
10 | NORRIS
11 | STROLL +0.562
12 | ZHOU +0.995
RACE CONTROL
DRS ENABLED
S1 S2 S3
10 / 20 1:32.552
Best 1:32.552
Previous 1:32.552
9 | GASLY
DISABLE LB
4%
DRS is being enabled this lap. We can use DRS when you're within 1 second of the car ahead and in the DRS Zone.

trying to beat your team-mate, which moves a sliding bar left or right between you as the season unfolds. You can gamble on how far you think you can push the bar at the start of the season, which is cool, giving every action extra significance. Do well enough against your teammate and you'll start to get preferential treatment in the development of your car, even though you both share the gains.

But once you've cemented your position as the better driver, you start new rivalries with others. Poor Sergio Perez soon has the sword of Damocles hanging over him as you vie for his Red Bull seat. There are also supposedly 'secret' meetings with other teams, but as soon as you turn them down (why on Earth would Lando Norris want to go to Williams? Come on, now!) your agent tells you the team is really happy with your loyalty. Secret indeed. Get caught sneaking, though, and your rep will take a big hit.

The returning F1 World mode still sees you completing events and series to earn points to spend on your car, collecting and upgrading rare loot to make your ride more competitive. However, the novelty has worn off a little, and the quality of the loot on offer is questionable. It is simply very underwhelming to open a new reward and find some ugly gloves inside. The 'Dino' sticker of cartoon dinosaurs to go around the inside of the halo is cute, but hardly worth writing home about.

STUFF OF LEGEND

What is worth telling everyone is that you can now play career mode as an icon. Past drivers like Ayrton Senna, James Hunt, and even Pastor Maldonado are no longer consigned to team-mate status – you can join Leclerc as Nigel Mansell, back at Ferrari 34 years later. Amazing scenes. It does make the game at least ten percentage points better when you do this. The game also takes into account drivers' own career stories, allowing you to win Lewis his eighth (cough ninth) world title.

The game engine has been beautifully optimised and still doesn't need a mega-rig to look great. On a now-ageing RTX 2070-enabled laptop, it still manages to run on Ultra-High at 1080p with ray tracing enabled at a silky smooth framerate. Stuttering is rare, only evident on a few specific corners, like the approach to Aquaminerale at Imola, suggesting there's some kind of processor bottleneck at that point rather than the engine straining to run the game in general. Aside from some further, odd time-lagging after camera changes in a few replay scenes, it runs perfectly, with glorious environmental graphics and beautifully detailed cars. Even the drivers look better this year, with more realistic faces, even if they don't close their eyes fully when they blink. The overall effect is getting close to the TV presentation now.

Even the drivers look better this year, with more realistic faces

In isolation, *F1 24*'s still an incredible videogame. But this template is so well-worn now, it finally feels like a change is needed. When ten-person dev teams can make gems like *New Star GP* and create a fresh-feeling, super-fun F1 game with just as much tactical depth and emphasis on management of resources as this, you do wonder if it's time to properly shake things up. For all the new career structure, it still boils down to trying to keep everyone happy and beat your rivals, which isn't that different at all. In fact, the old system was arguably clearer and it certainly feels like it's all the same mechanisms anyway underneath all the new circles.

The crashes are decent but still underplayed. It would be better if the game went back to the crash physics of *F1 2010*, but the cars here do at least occasionally get airborne in accidental crashes, which feels like a step forwards, even if such spectacle is still few and far between. The multi-zonal car damage is still reigned in from what it could be, but on full simulation damage the cars do fall apart reasonably nicely and look suitably shattered after a big shunt. Even so, a few more AI mishaps would liven things up considerably.

VCARBS DIET

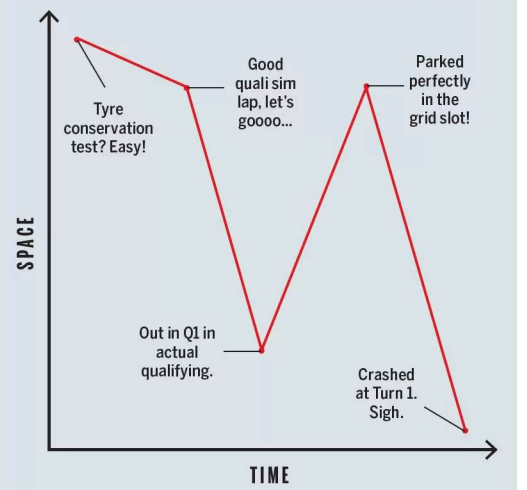
For all the gloss and improved presentation, last year's game will be half its price in the bargain bin and demonstrably offers a more compelling singleplayer experience thanks to the Braking Point 2 story mode. Instead, thanks to the optional VIP pass and Pitcoin currencies (you can buy unlockable items faster by spending real money), *F1 24* could cost you another $29.95 if you feel you need 50,000 more Pitcoin. Further monetising a full-price game is a bold move, especially when it doesn't quite feel quite as finished this time out.

Annoyingly, Steam Deck isn't supported at present, although the same was true for *F1 23* at review time, and it received support with the first patch, so fingers crossed the same will happen for this one.

It's very likely Codemasters is prepping something bigger for next year like it did with *F1 23* and *F1 21* before that, but that doesn't make this offering any better. Unless you absolutely must have the correct teams and drivers on the grid or simply had to preorder to play the time-limited (now expired) Max Verstappen events of the Champions Edition, there's no clear reason to pay up to $119.99 for something so similar yet objectively smaller. Well, except for playing as Nigel Mansell. That is just too cool. ■

A STANDARD RACE WEEKEND

The ups and downs of being a racing driver


Tyre conservation test? Easy!
Good quali sim lap, let's goooo...
Out in Q1 in actual qualifying.
Parked perfectly in the grid slot!
Crashed at Turn 1. Sigh.
SPACE
TIME

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Less assured and sorely missing story mode, *F1 24* feels like a downgrade over *F1 23*.

74

TROUBLED WATERS

STILL WAKES THE DEEP is more than the sum of its horror parts

By Elie Gould

Going into *Still Wakes the Deep*, I was confident in my ability to withstand the horror clichés that I knew were about to come my way. But, instead of just dealing with your typical chase scenes and jumpscares, The Chinese Room decided to pull something out of its sleeve that I hadn't experienced before – the most traumatic dialogue and voice acting I've ever heard in a horror game.

You play as Caz McLeary, an electrical engineer on the Beira D oil rig who's running from the law and some stupid decisions. Caz has been on the rig for a while, so you don't have to worry about getting to know your co-workers – meaningful relationships have already been established. *Still Wakes the Deep* skips the usual slog of tutorial-like character introductions and just throws you into the meat of the story, and all of the interactions feel natural and worthwhile.

Entering the canteen for the first time was surprisingly sweet. Sitting down at a table with Brodie and Rafs, I found out that it was Rafs' first dive and that he was more than a little scared. While I wouldn't trade places with him, he seemed like he was in good hands with Brodie, someone with more experience. Then there was Trots' passionate speech to Gibbo and O'Connor about unionisation and how the Beira D was falling apart because Westminster was too greedy for its own good. These short interactions told me everything I wanted to know about my place on the Beira D, and made what came next all the more traumatic.

All I could do was listen as he came to terms with his death

After drilling through something that was probably best left alone, the rig descends into chaos. With communication patchy thanks to a selfish manager named Rennick and decaying safety mechanisms making escape impossible, you and the crew end up putting out fires in the hope that someone will notice the radio silence and come help.

No one takes charge, so most of the time I just darted around the rig trying to save as many people as I could, all while fixing the Beira D, which mostly just involved pressing buttons in a certain order or flicking the right switches. If you don't fix everything in a timely fashion, the rig will explode, taking you and everyone else down with it.

But even with all your expert button pushing, you can't rescue everyone. The hardest moment had to be a short phone call I had with a friend who was trapped in the lower levels of the rig. As the small room he sat in filled with gas and water, all I could do was listen as he came to terms with his death and then let out one last panicked whimper for help as the water finally touched his leg.

WEATHER THE STORM

The monster that arrives on the Beira D isn't as novel as *Still Wakes the Deep*'s surprisingly emotional story and superb voice acting, as most horror games involve some kind of bizarre and violent creature. But that

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A first-person horror game in which you have to navigate a sinking oil rig and an incomprehensible monster

EXPECT TO PAY
$50.95

DEVELOPER
The Chinese Room

PUBLISHER
Secret Mode

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600G, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

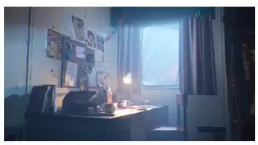
MULTIPLAYER
No

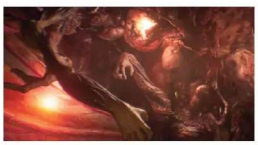
LINK
shorturl.at/UGc5s

TOP: You'll get to know your fellow co-workers well, with well-written, natural interactions.

"I told you to buy a 40W lightbulb, Jeff. You had one job!"

Better fill your boots, as trouble is a-coming.





ABOVE: Environments are often wonderfully real and bursting with lived-in character.

FAR RIGHT: "Yes, that's right, I'd like to order a subscription to PC PowerPlay magazine."

still didn't stop me from breaking into a sweat every time it got too close.

The interior of the rig is constantly morphing and breaking around the creature, which means it could be anywhere at any time. But once I realised that the strange bubbles and colours around my screen signified where and how close the monster was, I found it easier to make my way through the rig undetected, mostly by hiding in lockers or under debris.

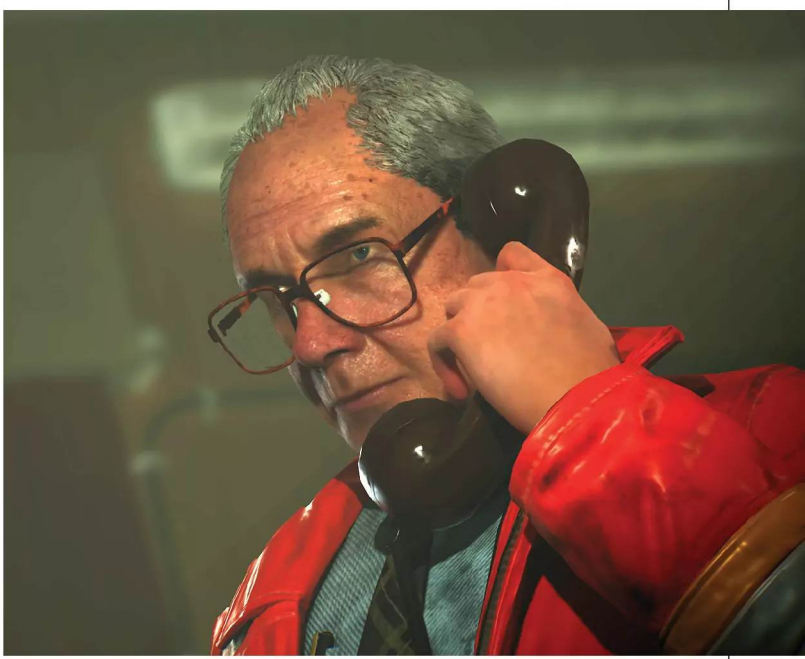
But even with all of that, getting chased through dark hallways or flooded areas by something recklessly barrelling down the rig took at least a couple of years off my life – it never got easier. At one point, I was cowering in the vents after I thought I had outrun the monster, only for it to burst through the vent cover.

If you can bear the emotional toll and terrifying moments, then *Still Wakes the Deep* is an experience that I couldn't recommend more highly. Its unsettling monster and horrific setting are elevated by something that's rare in horror games: meaningful relationships with other characters (sadly, your friendships don't tend to last long). ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

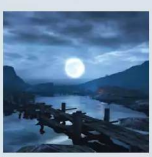
The Chinese Room's *Still Wakes the Deep* tells an emotive story that is equal parts terrifying and traumatic.

86



ENTER THE CHINESE ROOM

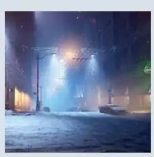
What games is this developer known for?



DEAR ESTHER 2012
A trip through a brilliantly conceived landscape that rewards attentive engagement with a moving story.

AMNESIA: A MACHINE FOR PIGS 2013
A cerebral and spooky adventure that expands on the franchise's sinister story and themes.

EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE 2015
A leisurely stroll through a b eautiful apocalypse. *Rapture* is a stirring and heartfelt journey.



VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE: BLOODLINES 2 2024
A long-awaited sequel to the cult RPG classic. Coming later this year.

PERFECTLY SHAPED

After a difficult year, Bungie pulls off a miracle with DESTINY 2: THE FINAL SHAPE

By Phil Savage

It's been weeks since *The Final Shape*'s release, and I'm spoiled for choice. Loading into the new Pale Heart destination, my map is filled with icons all fighting for attention. I could go exploring, hunting down Visions of the Traveler – hidden collectibles that give progress towards the exotic version of the Khvostov auto rifle. I could run a Cyst activity to collect more of the item needed to unlock the last few Fragments of the new Prismatic subclass.

Or I could matchmake into Overthrow, the new patrol event. Completing it gives another drop of the exotic sword Ergo Sum, which randomly rolls perks taken from other exotic weapons. I really want a version with Wolfpack Rounds.

Instead I pick up one of the post-campaign quests from Micah-10 to track down a lost Ghost somewhere else in the system. Sure, the Ascendant Shards it drops will be handy for masterworking some of the exotic class items I've picked up over the last couple of days. But more than that, each one hints at a future mystery – an unresolved thread teasing a potential story hook for this year's episodes and beyond. Here, with *The Final Shape*'s campaign finished, the Light and Darkness saga is over. But rather than feeling like an end, *Destiny 2* is now brimming with potential. The story of the last few years – our big confrontation with The Witness – is done. The future could be anything.

The amount there is to do – the density of missions and loot and other distractions – is testament to how good *The Final Shape* has been. I'll say it: this is the best *Destiny* expansion since *The Taken King*.

It wouldn't have mattered if the campaign had been a let down. Given *The Final Shape*'s role as the end of a decade-long saga, the pressure was on to deliver – to create something that justifies the time that its players have put in across the ten years of the series' life. Finally, we're heading inside the Traveler itself – getting a chance to uncover some of the mysteries at the heart of the giant orb of space magic that defines *Destiny*'s setting. It's an ethereal place, full of symbolism and memory – a decision that manifests in the return of some memorable locations.

The return of Cayde has more bite than you might initially expect

The nostalgia is rich but, aside from the return of the original Tower, it all feels like it's in service of the story being told. The first missions are a riff on the *Destiny 2* campaign – tracking down the Vanguard leaders and putting the band back together. And it becomes clear that it's their memories, as well as yours, that are defining the space.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The final expansion of *Destiny*'s Light and Darkness saga

EXPECT TO PAY
$74.95

DEVELOPER
Bungie

PUBLISHER
Bungie

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 3700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bungie.net

BATTLEZONE

The Witness is here too, corrupting those spaces – trying to tempt and manipulate each of your team. We find Zavala in the memory of the cottage where he once raised a family, now a battlezone full of Fallen and Dread. From the chimney of the cottage, thick smoke pours out taking the form of The Witness's heads. There's always a danger that mystical, unreal spaces devolve into something meaninglessly abstract, but the Pale Heart mostly holds up to scrutiny. It feels like there are rules defining why things are allowed to exist here, giving some meaning to the story as it plays out. And it means that, when you do encounter something familiar – a location, a mechanic, an enemy – it feels like a fun nod to the past rather than a tiresome retread.

Even the return of Cayde has more bite than you might initially expect. It's in the character's nature to hide behind jokes and banter, but there's a weight to him here that makes him a compelling presence beyond the comic relief.

There's a satisfying sense of progression, too. The campaign is entirely linear. You can't explore the Pale Heart freely until you've finished. Instead, when a mission is over, you're dropped into a campsite set up at that location – a space for your allies to discuss (or bicker over) current events and next objectives. And then it's on to the next space, pushing forward towards The Witness's spire.

It's a big improvement from previous campaigns, which at their worst can feel like a meandering tour through destinations – spinning wheels to fill time ahead of the final confrontation. Here, you can see the castle you're progressing towards. The feeling of a journey – of the finality of your destination – gives some necessary stakes.

TURN UP THE LIGHTS

How do the new super abilities shape up?

SONG OF FLAME

Class: Warlock

Subclass: Dawnblade

What it does: Lets you spam supercharged melee and grenade attacks while also giving damage resistance to your team.

Is it good? Yes, it's a way to not run Well of Radiance while still being useful to the team.

TWILIGHT ARSENAL

Class: Titan

Subclass: Sentinel

What it does: Throw some axes. They do damage, and then hang around so you (and your teammates) can pick them up and use 'em again.

Is it good? Finally, a Titan ranged super that does some decent damage.

STORM'S EDGE

Class: Hunter

Subclass: Arcstrider

What it does: Throw a knife to teleport to its location and do some damage. Then do it again two more times.

Is it good? That depends on the answer to one question: do you play PvP. If yes, it's good. If no, it's really not worth using.

ABSTRACT PRESENCE

In its couple of appearances in previous expansions, The Witness has until now been a somewhat abstract presence. A gestalt entity empowered by Darkness, whose end-of-the-universe plan involves freezing all reality into a perfect, ordered state. The nature of *The Final Shape* as a threat makes for an arresting aesthetic that becomes more prominent as you approach The Witness itself. The final few missions do a great job at setting the tone – eerie and ominous and alien. The Witness itself becomes more interesting, as its failings and flaws become apparent.

When *Lightfall*'s story arrived in such bad shape, I assumed it was because Bungie was trying to fit in more plot than a *Destiny 2* campaign could handle. But while *The Final Shape* is more focused, it's trying to do just as much – if not more – and largely succeeding. Temptations, doubts, a Guardian's relationship with their Ghosts and with each other, the big metaphysical stuff about Light and Darkness and the meaning to be found in each. There's a lot going on here. It doesn't all work perfectly – Zavala's character progression feels rushed, the Vanguard descending into infighting just a couple of beats too soon.

After the seventh mission – the traditional ending of the campaign – I was satisfied, thinking Bungie had made something that at least rivalled *The Witch Queen*. But the real ending unlocked later, after the first completion of the Salvation's Edge raid by a fireteam. A new 12-player activity unlocks the final fight of this story, and the cutscenes that follow it feel like a true payoff to ten years of *Destiny*. Here the focus is purely on the characters that have followed you across this journey.

The Final Shape draws on the language of the game's past to lead you

As for the missions themselves, there are a handful of memorable encounters and boss fights. The early campaign is easy going, even on legendary difficulty. But the challenge ramps up as you approach The Witness, and find yourself facing larger numbers of Tormentors and Subjugators – the heavy hitters of the new Dread faction.

A new enemy type makes a massive difference to how fights play out. I've been playing *Destiny 2* for long enough that target prioritisation is second nature, so adding a new element to the mix makes for some fresh and unexpected challenges. Their presence is dramatic in the new raid – possibly one of the best Bungie has made to date. The time pressure and complexity already make for challenging encounters, one my clan has been slowly working through over the last couple of weeks. But the Dread's focus on crowd control is the perfect foil – an extra stressor that all but guarantees forced errors and moments of panic. They're complete bastards, but that's exactly what makes them such a great addition to the game.

It's not just the new faction that adds some extra spice to the moment-to-moment play. Throughout *The Final Shape*, there's a greater emphasis on puzzles. The missions themselves borrow from previous raids and dungeons, using glyphs, motes and other mechanics in a more simple, direct form.

Whereas a mission in *Lightfall* might ask you to follow the objective marker into a sideroom to destroy the Macguffin that was blocking your abilities, *The Final Shape* draws on the language of the game's past to lead you in the right direction without outright telling you what to do. If some Taken blights spawn, destroy them. That might open a portal that takes you to the side room with a miniboss that, when it's dead, shows a glyph. Head back to the main arena, pick up the shard that displays the matching glyph and voilà, you've removed the main boss's shield. On a practical level the mechanics are often just a way to stop me using a Bait & Switch grenade launcher to insta-nuke the boss and quickly end the encounter. But they also provide a natural flow that makes working through the process feel satisfying.

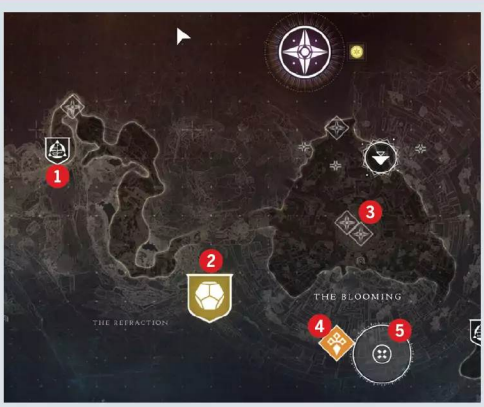
NEW SANDBOX FEATURES

Combat is also refreshed thanks to some new sandbox features. The new Prismatic subclass is the major addition for this release. Rather than add a completely new element, it lets you mix and match parts of existing subclasses. An Arc grenade with a Strand melee. A Solar aspect to complement your Stasis super. Each class gets one grenade, super, melee and aspect from each of their subclasses, and so the limitations of Prismatic are defined by what isn't part of the kit. Titans don't get access to Banner of War. Warlocks can't use Well of Radiance. That's probably for the best – it keeps the elemental subclasses viable through their specific focus and synergies. But even with that in mind, some strong Prismatic builds have emerged.

As a Warlock – the class I've used in most of my playtime so far – you can lean hard into buddies, using Getaway Artist to spawn an Arc Soul and the Hellion fragment to create a Solar orb that lobs mortar fire at anything in sight. It's a fun little combo with absurd ability regeneration potential. But even with the extra power offered by Prismatic, and particularly Transcendence, I'm

PALE OUT

There's a lot to do in the Pale Heart



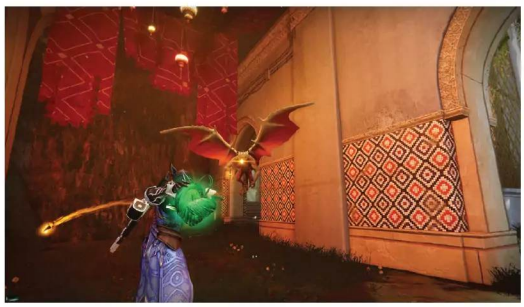
1 CYSTS A special activity themed around a specific challenge, like not getting blown up by exploding moths.

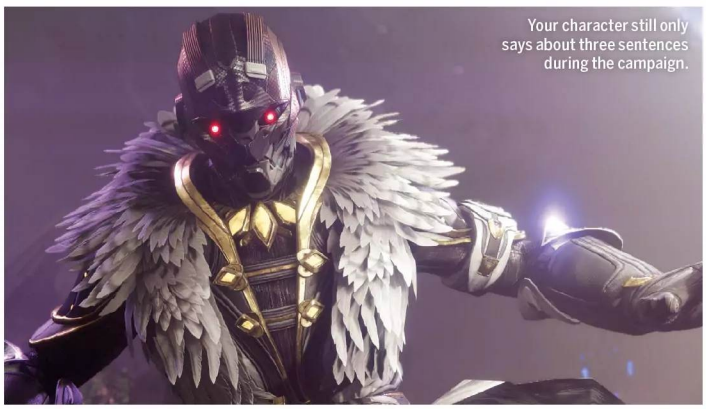
2 DUAL DESTINY A two-person exotic mission that feels like a mini-dungeon. Complete it to unlock an exotic class item.

3 PATHFINDER Instead of bounties, you now have Pathfinder objectives. Complete these for XP and loot.

4 OVERTHROW The Pale Heart's signature activity. Run around the map completing events and opening chests.

5 SEARCH ZONE There's something in here. It could be a Ghost, or a puzzle or maybe a new unlock for your Prismatic subclass.





Your character still only says about three sentences during the campaign.

ABOVE: Oh yeah, Cayde's back.

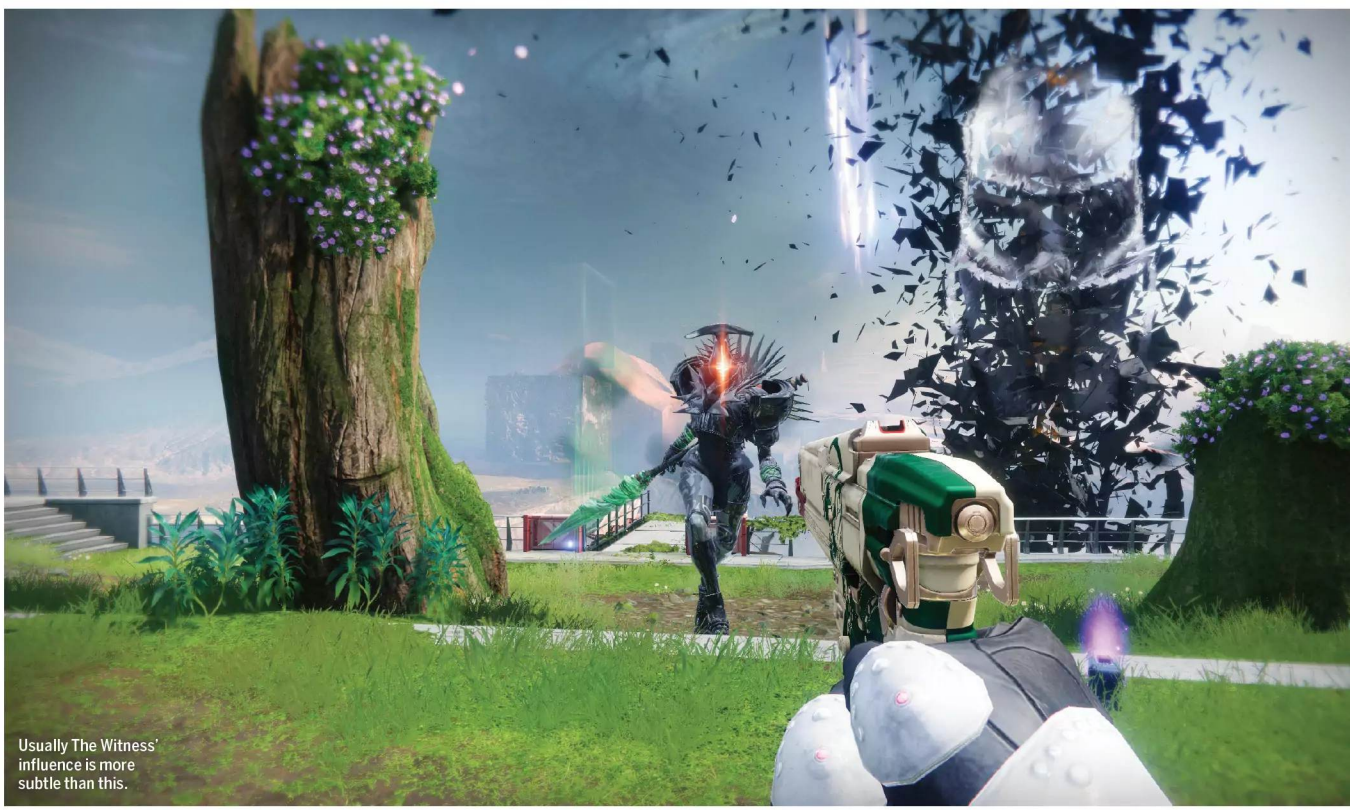
LEFT: How does Bungie let you know it's weird in the Traveler? Big Ghosts.

Subjugators are jerks. They will kill you a lot.

Everyone's pretty worried about being a messed up statue for the rest of time.

RIGHT: Bored of being attacked by orange, blue and purple? Get ready for green!

FAR RIGHT: Just a normal gestalt entity, trying to end the universe.



Usually The Witness' influence is more subtle than this.

still finding plenty of playtime on older subclasses.

On the Hunter and Titan front, plenty of strong Prismatic builds have emerged too. Overall, Prismatic isn't the big shake-up of a brand new elemental subclass – like Strand in *Lightfall* or Stasis in *Beyond Light* – but it works well as an avenue for more advanced and varied buildcrafting. So far my experience with Prismatic has been one of experimentation, swapping out specific elements to see if it better fits my play style.

If the campaign is a triumph, it's what you'll do after it's finished that cements *The Final Shape*'s staying power. There's plenty of post-campaign missions to tackle, but more important is that the Pale Heart as a destination is less disposable than the patrol zones of past expansions. The new destination activity, Overthrow, is a blast. Here you're dropped into an area, and left free to progress through its multiple stages of completion however you want. Enemies killed, chests spawned, events completed – all add points to the board, and once the required total is met, you move to the next stage. At the end, a boss fight and a decent chunk of loot.

As a basic activity it has a nice cadence, helped by the fact that enemy difficulty has been toned down from *Lightfall*'s destination, Neomuna. And it gels well with other pursuits throughout the Pale Heart. The map is constantly filling up with things to do – lost Ghosts to hunt down, weird secrets to find, and Pathfinder objectives to complete. The latter is *The Final Shape*'s replacement for bounties. It's a series of basic objectives – usually killing a number of enemies with a specific element, weapon type or in a particular location – that you complete to build a path towards its major reward. Once you've claimed your prize, you reset your path and start again. It's pretty basic stuff, but having a constant tick of XP and rewards without needing to pay attention is a nice little bonus.

Pathfinder has also replaced the bounties of the ritual activity vendors for Strikes, Crucible and Gambit. This has proved a more controversial change, in part because the ritual Pathfinder is combined across all three activity types. If you're not a PvP player, you'll sometimes find yourself unable to progress to the final reward without venturing into the Crucible, and vice versa. And for the type of player that obsessively completed bounties in pursuit of Bright Dust – the free currency used in the Eververse cosmetic shop – it's a straight downgrade in what they could earn. Personally, though, as someone who'd long stopped interacting with the bounty system, the system is a marginal improvement – a way to get some rewards without having to interrupt what I was doing, load into the Tower and pick up a bunch of extra objectives I didn't want to do. Now at least I'll accidentally complete a few, and get some free XP because of it.

The new destination activity, Overthrow, is a blast

The main success of the Pale Heart is that its loot is worth pursuing. Previously, destination weapons have been underwhelming, with poor stat distributions and mediocre perks. But the new expansion's arsenal is full of desirable new guns, including brand-new frame archetypes that offer some obvious avenues to expand our arsenals in future.

A week after the launch of *The Final Shape*, the first episode – this year's replacement for seasons – arrived. With it, even more interesting weapons were added to the sandbox, including a new grenade launcher archetype that acts as a legendary version of Witherhoard. I've barely touched the episode so far, but based on what I've seen I'm not blown away by its structure. Right now, it feels like any other season – a series of story beats, unfolding week by week, with a couple of activities to pass the time. How it'll progress over the coming weeks and subsequent acts will be a big test of how Year 7 will feel, and whether the switch from four seasons to three episodes makes for an improvement.

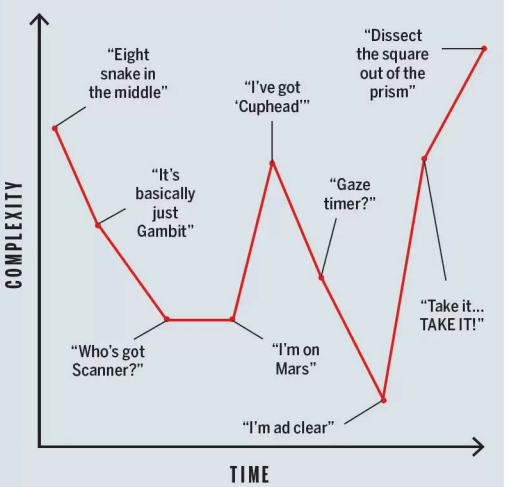
DIFFICULT YEAR

It's no secret that Bungie has had a difficult year. Following *Lightfall*'s disappointing release, the studio was hit by lay-offs. Numerous reports surfaced about tensions between employees and management, with much of the blame for the game's most controversial design decisions being placed at the studio management's feet. That Bungie's development team created an expansion this good out of that chaos is nothing short of miraculous, but now that it has it feels crucial that Bungie as a studio listens to the community's reaction. This is the path forward – the version of a *Destiny 2* expansion that delivers what its most dedicated players want.

When *Destiny 2* is firing on all cylinders, there's really nothing else like it. No other studio is creating a live-service shooter with this kind of scale, with this much attention paid to story and encounter design. It's a game that has to live with its mistakes – alienating for new players, off putting to those still appalled at the decision made years ago to remove its oldest raids – while still forging a path into the future. *The Final Shape* doesn't fix all of *Destiny 2*'s problems, and it doesn't guarantee that the future will be bright. But here, it feels triumphant – a celebration of the decade that's come before, and a reward for those of us who've chosen to give it our time. ■

BRAIN TRAINING

How does the new raid stack up?

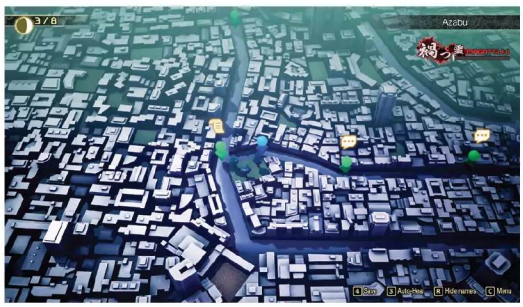


PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The best *Destiny 2* expansion – both a satisfying conclusion to the series' first saga, and a shooter full of stuff.

92

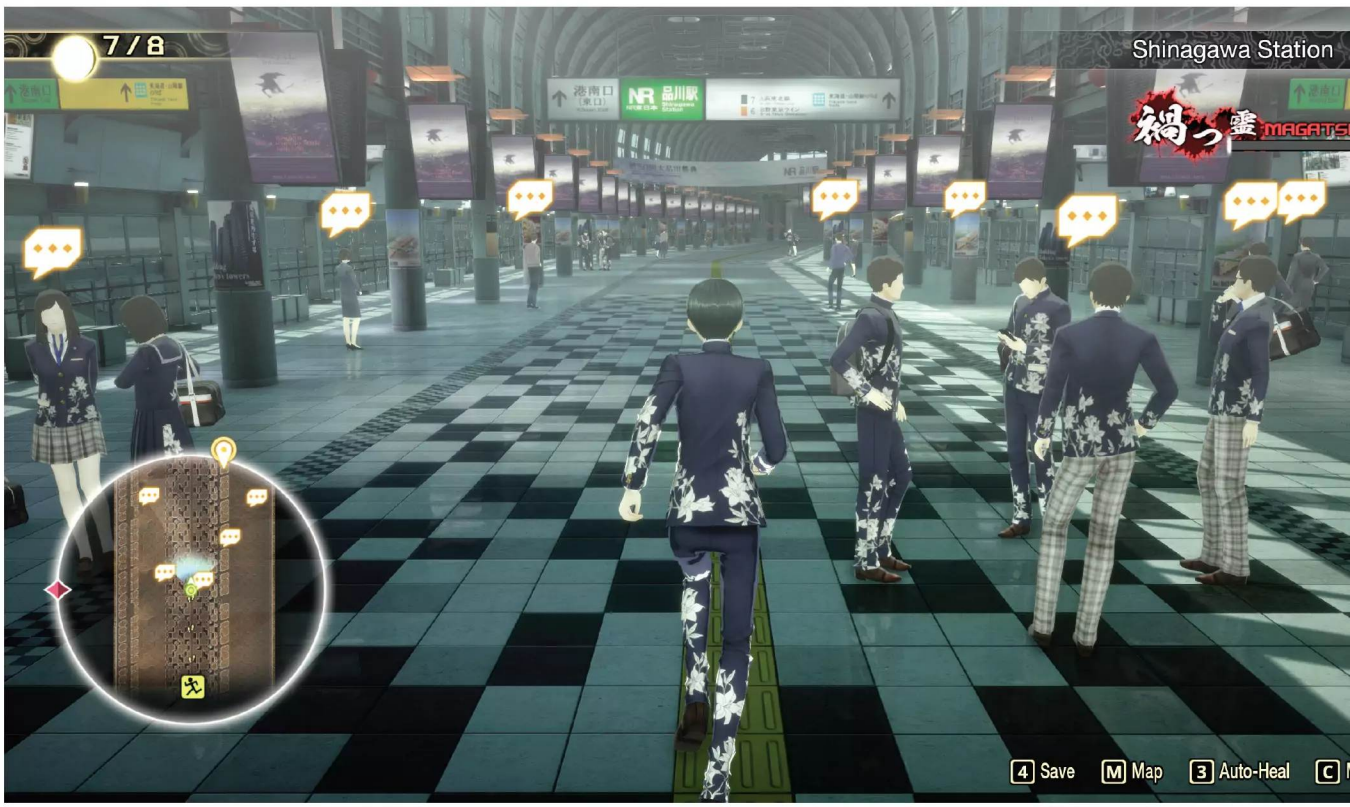
That's not a sword. This is a sword!



RIGHT: This guy's just popping out to pick up the latest issue of PC PowerPlay magazine.

BELOW: Live the life of a student in Tokyo while besting demons. What's not to like?

Just imagine the hair care regimes. So. Much. Product!



HEAVENLY

A garden of diabolical delights make SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V: VENGEANCE feel fresh

By Kerry Brunskill

Negotiating with demons in *Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance* is as dangerous, unpredictable and hilarious as it's ever been in the 32 years of the series' existence, and like much in this latest entry will feel very familiar to fans of Atlus' long-running apocalyptic RPG. Tokyo is once again the place where sassy mythological beings and neon-lined sci-fi meet, where programming and prayers have equal power.

The entry to the *Shin Megami Tensei* world isn't totally smooth for the uninitiated, though. There's a lot to learn right from the start. Even the most basic enemies come with multiple resistances and weaknesses as standard, and then there are all those status effects, weird items and moon phases to worry about on top. Between those and unhelpfully impenetrable names like Masukukaja it'd be easy to give up on the whole thing in an element-induced rage.

It doesn't happen though, because *Vengeance* tries its best to make everything as clear as possible, even when I'm facing hordes of monsters lifted from every folk tale ever told. The UI breaks down everything, revealing enemy weaknesses, explaining the effects of skills and spells, showing who they've been applied to, and indicating if they've stacked with a buff or debuff. Getting all of my demonic ducks in a row is a relatively painless process.

TURN-BASED TPK

And it's vital I get the hang of all this quickly because unless I'm drastically over-levelled there's a real chance some random group of nobodies could wipe out my entire party. I'm always one careless decision away from a trip back to the title screen, one lazy assumption that healing can wait standing between me and my entire team getting burned to ash.

As unforgiving as *Vengeance* is of any slip-up, it always feels fair because the game can't do anything to me that I can't do to it. The series' now signature Press Turn system offers huge rewards for making even the mildest effort to engage with it, with every critical hit and exploited enemy weakness giving my team more turns in a row, and that means even more opportunities to pile on the pain – or recover from it.

Facing hordes of monsters lifted from every folk tale ever told

And with so many deadly skills to learn and demons to fuse together into new and increasingly outlandish abominations, I'm encouraged to get creative about combat, too. If I can't overpower a boss, then why don't I try weakening it instead? Why not boost my party's evasion, forcing its attacks to miss and its upcoming damage-dealing turns to disappear in the process? Why not use an item that completely blocks its favourite elemental attack just before it has a chance to unleash anything? The strategic possibilities here are endless, and before long I'm leaving bosses begging for a turn of their own, after which they'll probably just hit someone on their own team.

DEMONIC PLEASURE

Most of the time, anyway. Some days I'm too tired, or too busy, or just too excited to see where the story goes to want to spend my free time carefully constructing the sort of teams and tactics able to topple gods and send demons scuttling back to the netherworld. So it's a good thing *Vengeance* is happy to help, once more. Thanks to its easy-going approach to difficulty settings it can keep the story going for everyone, from dedicated demon hunters to first-timers.

Vengeance is an easy game to like. It's an epic adventure packed full of surprises, with enough bite and strategic depth for the oldest of old hands, and more than enough assistance to help newcomers feel right at home. No series does the whole 'taking on god' thing as perfectly as *Shin Megami Tensei*, which has now been iterating on the concept for decades, so seeing every deity and spirit imaginable wandering around Tokyo, right next to schools, trains and vending machines will always be an incredible, enthusing sight. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A fantastic port of one of this generation's best RPGs, stuffed with a game's worth of extras

EXPECT TO PAY
$99.95

DEVELOPER
Atlus

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
atlus.com/smt5v

NAHOBINO NOTES

Meet the game's protagonist

1. Nahobino is a high school student living in Tokyo. His main hobby is reading, hence, he can often be found with a book in his hands.
2. The protagonist's powers come after fusing with the mysterious Aogami, a demon who has a mission to protect humanity.
3. Combined, Nahobino and Aogami can fight demons and deities alike, with Nahobino controlling his body and Aogami providing guidance.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance combines the fresh, familiar, and the fiendish into one incredible RPG.

91

ZAP

Grab a notebook – every answer is a mystery in LORELEI AND THE LASER EYES

By Autumn Wright

L*orelei and the Laser Eyes* is an eclectic, puzzle-filled, haunted-mansion mystery thriller for PC and Nintendo Switch. It's a mystery game not only in the narrative sense; discovering what kinds of puzzles are hidden in its halls and what they look like on your screen is all part of its charm. But getting the answer is never enough as UI, art style and perspective all warp with the mystery. It's not only a challenge to find a code, but also to read it, and then use it on whatever interface is in front of you.

Lorelei bears little resemblance to Swedish studio Simogo's 2019 neon rhythm game, *Sayonara Wild Hearts*. It's slow, all greyscale with distinguished red accents, and its pacing is built around your own wit. Simogo has previously played in this realm to smaller acclaim: the text-based mystery game *Device 6* was an early iOS hit. And while both games involve reading through the content of text documents to find answers, *Lorelei* has a whole haunted manor filled with 3D puzzle boxes, safes, locked doors, art installations, mazes and other puzzles that aren't immediately evident.

Set in the Hotel Letztes Jahr, *Lorelei* builds off well-worn tropes to establish its tense tone. The player character, Renate, is an artist invited to the remote central European woods by eccentric bohemian filmmaker Renzo Nero. And I think Renate may be the one writing the puzzling quest I am partaking in. It's hard to explain. Everything has been obfuscated – to her and me. If you know where to look, the mysteries begin as soon as Renate steps out of her car outside the gates. Finding objects and reading item descriptions is one central component of *Lorelei*'s puzzle-solving, but it will only get you started.

Your other hand will always be busy with note-taking

Just as its narrative and imagery are taken from a collage of inspirations, so too are *Lorelei*'s mechanics. Logic, geometry, number and time systems, astrology and so much more are all fair game. With a unique control scheme designed around minimal inputs, it's also entirely playable with one hand. Your other hand will always be busy with note-taking. And it's when *Lorelei*'s puzzles combine these systems that it all starts to feel sprawling. The many puzzles of its manor are built atop these different logics that keep me disoriented but excited.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 3D, puzzle-filled, haunted-mansion mystery thriller made for extensive note-taking

EXPECT TO PAY
$36.95

DEVELOPER
Simogo

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10700F, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
simogo.com/work/loreleiandthelasereyes

EARLY IMPASSE

It can be hard to recognise an impasse early on, and on several occasions I missed the turn of a page or a movable object that left me stuck for hours at a time. Yet I am grateful I persisted. For the most part, the game design is an effective guide. Pursuing different kinds of puzzles of uncertain narrative import led me to many dead ends, but there are narrative revelations and mechanical delights beyond those impasses. It's revealed early on what the game is building towards: decoding several alphabets used in different codes to unlock... something at the heart of this hotel's past. When I finally started cracking one code, I felt like I had begun to uncover the knowledge of the ancients. I am so smart. I am... stuck again. And repeat.

The most delightful of these moments were when new puzzles introduced not just new mechanics, but new gameplay. Among the surprises, there's a series of point-and-click adventures that play with the games' save system.

While I've grown familiar with the layout of its hotel, *Lorelei*'s mystery narrative still dangles its loose ends as an incentive to keep solving puzzles or sifting through in-game texts. Ultimately, though, I don't think its ending particularly matters. No revelation could give me what hours of haunted puzzle solving on the edge of my seat – pencil in hand – could. Simogo has already found the most important answers. ■

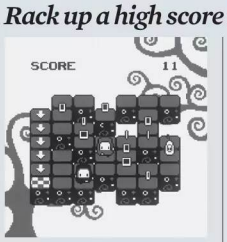
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A thrilling mystery that asks players to rise to its challenges, and rewards them when they do.

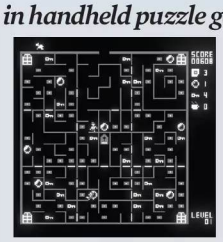
89

8-BIT GAMING

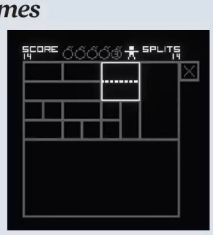
Rack up a high score in handheld puzzle games



ILOMILO SHUFFLE
Keep Ilo and Milo safe as tiles continue to fall.

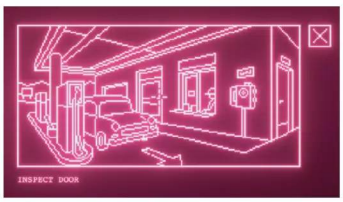


LORELEI AND THE LASER EYES
It's *Pac-Man*, but meta.



SPL-T 2
Figure out the rules of this puzzling twist on *Minesweeper*.

A shattered maze at the heart of the mystery.



ABOVE: From investigation to interrogation.

LEFT: But first, how to unlock the gates?

You can pet the dog.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

You'll speak to a variety of ghosts, including a butchered butcher.

OUIJA DOES IT

Become a psychic detective in the spooky **SEANCE**

Solving a murder would be so much easier if you could just dial up the victim and chat with their ghost, wouldn't it? Or that's what film and TV has led us to believe. What if the spirit can't remember what happens, or they only have a few fragmentary pieces of information to share with you? Even when you're interviewing the dead, there can still be plenty of detective work involved.

That's the setup for *Seance*, where you play as a medium tasked with investigating the murder of a woman named Tamsin, a case in which very little is known by the police. They've tried detecting the normal way, but now they need a psychic to bust out the ouija board and interview her ghost one L-E-T-T-E-R at a time. Thankfully, her responses are played out in regular, fully voiced dialogue.

After the first couple of times, *Seance* even removes the need to painstakingly type out each question, with a handy notebook you can just click on to select known topics. It's a little less immersive, but much more convenient.

At times you feel like Phoenix Wright, as a succession of ghostly witnesses relive their deaths to tell you about their killer, as you press them for additional detail, and as you deploy the evidence at appropriate junctures to jog their memories. Before long, you have a small stable of ghosts at your beck and call, who don't seem to mind being summoned and banished repeatedly. You also have a detective sitting nearby, who will add concrete detail to the ghosts' often vague recollections.

You do feel like a detective slowly unravelling a case

JUSTICE FOR ALL

With all that going on, you do feel like a detective slowly unravelling a case, starting with nothing more than a name and ending with... well, it all gets a bit ridiculous, but it's good fun with it. It's an intuitive game, and all but impossible to get lost in the weeds, as you can only type out, with the planchette, the same questions that are listed in your notebook. The ouija board is just for show.

It is slightly disappointing – in a game featuring a ouija board, and that lets you type whatever you want with it – to have it only recognise a small selection of words. Completely understandable for a free jam game, but at the same time not quite living up to the promise of the premise.

Still, I enjoyed the process, even if the detective work is limited in scope. It's a beautifully presented mystery with a tactile ouija board to play around with and fully voice-acted characters, who make you feel for their plights even as you're calling them up just one more time to ask about weird smells. We'll have to wait for a proper ouija simulator, then, but this is still an enjoyably spooky detective game that channels *Phoenix Wright*, while turning up the supernatural elements. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A detective game in which you interview ghosts with the aid of a ouija board

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Alex Rose

PUBLISHER
Alex Rose

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

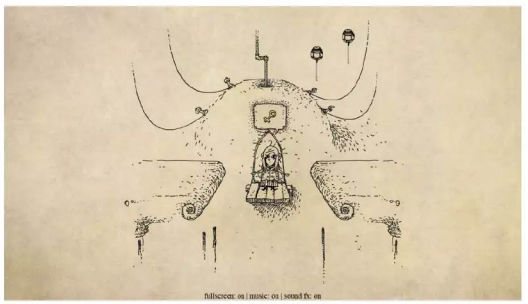
LINK
bit.ly/SeanceGame

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A polished and enjoyable ghostly adventure game, although a bit limited in its detective elements.

73

BELOW: There's no dialogue, but that would only spoil the atmosphere.



CAT POWER

Flash relic DAYMARE CAT gets a welcome glow-up

The Flash games I remember most fondly are the games like Mateusz Skutnik's *Daymare Cat*, which mixed beautifully hand-drawn artwork with simple puzzles and small-scale exploration. There was a minimalism to these Flash-based puzzlers that you don't see much anymore. Playing this remaster is like being transported back to 2013.

I'm being very specific about the year because that's when *Daymare Cat* was originally released. Well, it's just been remastered, and I'm pleased to report that it's just as lovely as the game I sort of remember.

There's an atmosphere to Mateusz Skutnik's games: a stillness tinged with mild unease, as you flit from one beautifully sketched fantasy scene to another. But it's a fantasy world minus the reams of description, with little colour and environments that sputter at the edges. You're never quite sure where you are, but the dreamlike architecture make it a joy just to exist in the world.

Here, as a girl called Cat (I think), you're trying to collect scattered vinyl discs, which need to be placed atop record players, to open the door that will ultimately take you out of the city. There's a bit of platforming and lever-pulling – Skutnik's games have grown more involved since – but complexity is often a barrier, and there are none here. All you need are the arrow keys, a curious disposition, and 20 minutes to spare.

This remaster improves the platforming and art assets, and brings it up to 60fps, and the result is a smooth little wander, with a fidelity that wouldn't have been possible back in the Flash era. ■

78

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Mateusz Skutnik	bit.ly/DaymareCat

HOLE NEW WORLD

Falling with style in AGUJERO

The term dungeon crawler summons images of descending into a labyrinthine dungeon, but for 99% of the time you're really just travelling sideways. If only you could cut through all the floors filled with monsters and traps and simply dig a big hole to the heart of the dungeon. Oh, hello, *Agujero*.

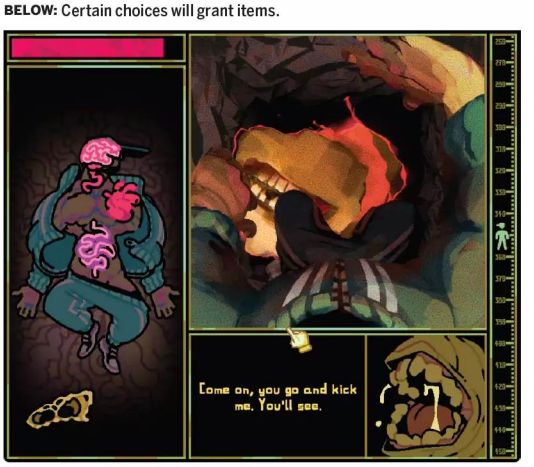
Agujero is just that: a game about falling down a giant hole, and by that I mean shuffling, as you slowly squeeze through one section at a time by repeatedly tapping the down arrow. It's a hole filled with creatures, who will emerge from under you at regular junctures to ask a question or demand something of you, and how you respond will determine if you make it to the bottom.

These encounter choices roughly coincide with your bodily organs: with your brains, heart and guts, so if it seems like outsmarting the creature will be the best approach, you can drag your brains onto it and hope for the best. Your guts, meanwhile, will usually make you kick the creature – also a valid approach. It's hardly BioWare, however, and in effect you're picking choices in the dark, as you scrutinise the text descriptions to try and work out what your character will ultimately do. Mess up and you can retry, but with a chunk taken permanently out of your health bar.

In a game this short, that's not too bad, but I had less fun the second time, as the encounters are not randomised and there's a lot of tapping down until anything happens. But even if you don't finish it, this is one of those games you should make ten minutes for, just to dive into its lurid, pulsating setting. ■

60

BELOW: Certain choices will grant items.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Renato Meyer et al	bit.ly/AgujeroGame

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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

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GROUP TEST

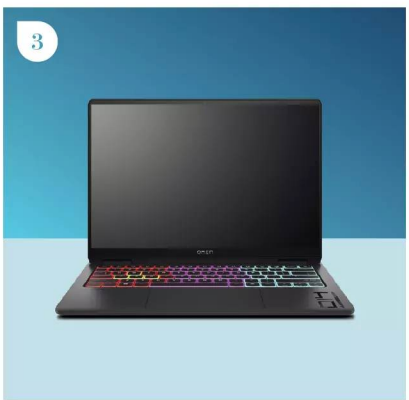
GAMING LAPTOPS

Bold designs and powerful components – a new wave of gaming laptops arrives

By Jacob Ridley

The gaming laptop market never stands still for a moment. So, how are you ever supposed to know what's worth spending your money on? We've been prodding and poking heaps of the latest gaming laptops to find out.

It's worth saying that you're much better off buying a current generation GPU, such as Nvidia's RTX 40-series, rather than something older. The older generations aren't worth the money any more. You might want to consider one of AMD's Ryzen 8000/7000-series CPUs, as these come with a decent iGPU.



Blade 14

RAZER **$4,599**

Performance leader

1 The Blade 14 is far from the slimmest 14-inch gaming laptop around. But it is the most impressive on performance. It may appear not dissimilar to the Zephyrus G14 in many regards – the two laptops we tested are near enough identical with the same RTX 4070 GPU and AMD Ryzen 9 8945HS CPU. Though the Razer is able to push a lot more power through its GPU. The Blade 14's GPU runs at 140W – 115W with an extra 25-watt afterburner – much higher than the 90W limit on the G14. That has a huge impact on our testing in the latest games. On average, the Blade 14 is 18% faster at 1080p, or 13% at 1440p. The G14 is slower still at its native resolution, which is greater than the Blade 14's.

The Blade 14 does a few other things extremely well. Thermals are impressively stable and cool and the RAM is upgradeable. You won't find that on the G14. However, after spending time with both, I find myself drawn to the slim profile, OLED screen, and lower price tag of the Zephyrus G14.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Snappy trackpad
- → Excellent performance
- → No OLED

SPECS **CPU:** RYZEN 9 8945HS / **GPU:** RTX 4070 (140 W) / **RAM:** 32GB DDR5-5600 / **SCREEN TYPE:** IPS / **RESOLUTION:** 2560 X 1600 / **REFRESH RATE:** 240 HZ / **WEIGHT:** 2.45 KG

ROG Zephyrus G14

ASUS **$3,699**

Revamped chassis

2 After spending some time with the latest 14-inch gaming laptops on the market, it's the Zephyrus G14 I'd like to keep most of all. It's an enviable blend of an all-metal chassis, OLED screen, RTX 40-series GPU and the shiniest eight-core/16-thread CPU outta AMD. This is a brand-new chassis design for 2024, and it's a big improvement on the previous. It's only 1.63 cm at its thickest point, and it weighs just 1.5 kg, which makes it much more an easy travel companion than the Blade 14 – its most direct competitor, though often a much pricier option. To reach this compact size, the G14 does ditch upgradeable memory. It used to be possible to change one SO-DIMM on previous models, but the new one is entirely soldered. With any luck, you won't need to upgrade.

The OLED screen is the major selling point of the G14. It's vibrant, colourful and speedy – this model can reach up to 120Hz. It's also 16:10, which is critical for actually getting anything else done.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → OLED
- → Portable
- → Low-power GPU

SPECS **CPU:** RYZEN 9 8945HS / **GPU:** RTX 4070 (90 W) / **RAM:** 32GB LPDDR5X / **SCREEN TYPE:** OLED / **RESOLUTION:** 2880 X 1800 / **REFRESH RATE:** 120 HZ / **WEIGHT:** 1.5 KG

Transcend 14

HP OMEN **$3,699**

OLED for less

3 One of the very few gaming laptops powered by one of Intel's new Core Ultra processors, the Transcend 14 is a surprisingly lovely little laptop. It's a new design out of Omen, HP's gaming subsidiary, and it's done well to offer something competitive right out of the gate.

Its strength lies in its price tag. It's far cheaper than the other 14-inch gaming laptops in this test, and a good price for a decent specification. The RTX 4060 model is a much better price than the RTX 4070 model, however. Most of all, it's an excellent way to score yourself an OLED panel on the cheap.

The downside is the Transcend's poor battery life. For general day-to-day tasks, it's OK, at around four hours. While gaming that's obviously much lower, and came in right at the bottom end of our testing. Still, there's a lot here to like considering the price tag isn't too tall. So cheap and cheerful, but there are better laptops out there.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Affordable
- → OLED
- → Poor battery life

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE ULTRA 7 155H / **GPU:** RTX 4060 (65W) / **RAM:** 16GB LPDDR5X / **SCREEN TYPE:** OLED / **RESOLUTION:** 2880 X 1800 / **REFRESH RATE:** 120 HZ / **WEIGHT:** 1.63 KG

Legion 7 16IRX9

LENOVO **$3,499**

Great in white

4 The Legion 7 does some things very well. The IPS screen, for example, is a testament to how impressive this panel technology can be, even in the face of more modern OLEDs. It's fast at 240Hz, too. This laptop is also a great example of how not every laptop has to come in black or silver – the Legion 7 looks dashing in white. The 16-inch gaming laptop market isn't an easy ride, however. It's the de facto chassis size for the best and brightest laptops going, such as the Blade 16, and the Lenovo struggles to keep up with the pack. Quite literally. In gaming and CPU tests, the Lenovo was often playing catch-up, and while it never disgraced itself with poor performance, it regularly felt on the back foot with thermals.

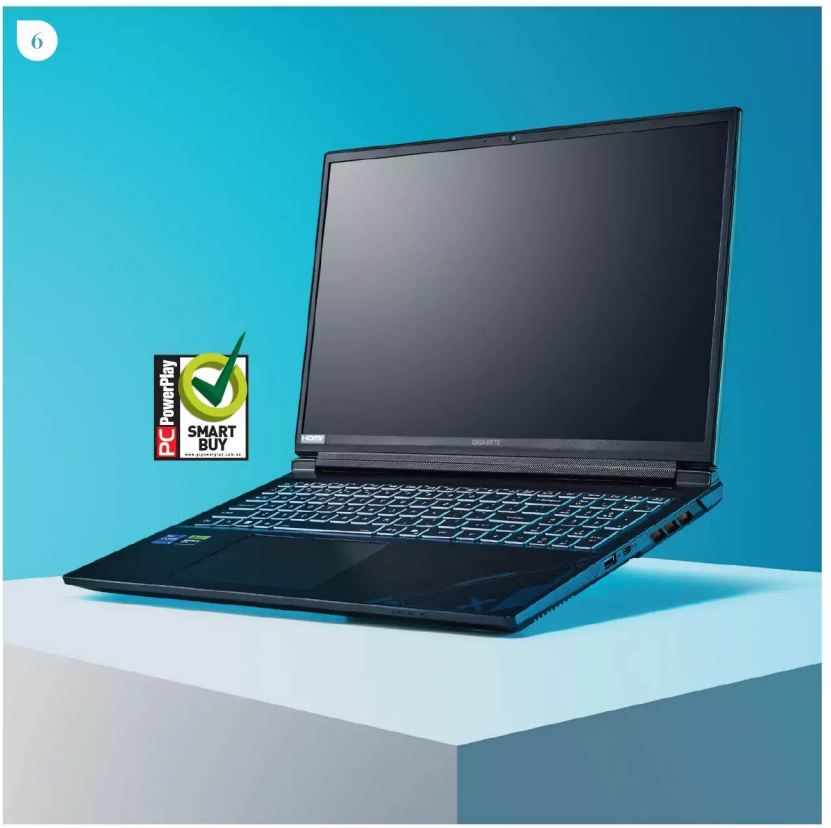
We recorded this laptop hitting 100°C under multi-core CPU testing conditions, and that appears to be what holds it back for performance. Also, while the white finish is gorgeous, it did get marked easily – and we're very careful with these laptops for testing. Promise.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → 240Hz
- → White finish
- → Underwhelming fps

SPECS CPU: CORE I9 14900HX / **GPU:** RTX 4070 (130 W) / **RAM:** 32GB DDR5-5600 / **SCREEN TYPE:** IPS / **RESOLUTION:** 2560 X 1600 / **REFRESH RATE:** 240 HZ / **WEIGHT:** 2.24 KG

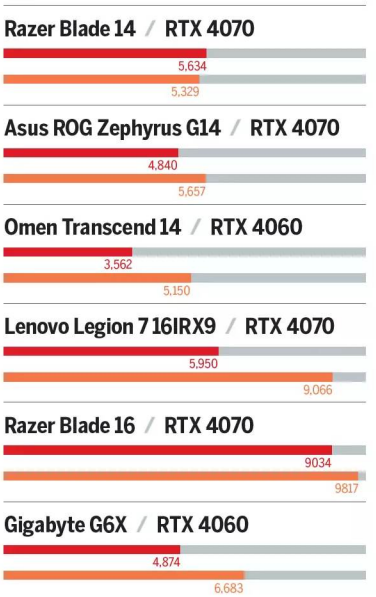
THE OLED PANEL
ON THE BLADE 16
IS A DOOZY
PC PowerPlay
POWER
AWARD
5



BENCHMARKS

3DMark Time Spy Extreme

- GPU index (higher number is better)
- CPU index (higher number is better)



Blade 16

RAZER **$6,699**

Glorious gaming

5 I could write about how the Blade 16 is built like a tank, but you've heard it all before. Razer's premium chassis is all that, yada yada. No, let's talking about the two more recent additions to this popular high-end gaming laptop: the OLED screen and the gigantic trackpad. The OLED panel on the Blade 16 is a doozy. It's a 1600p OLED with a fantastic HDR implementation. That means you can safely enable HDR in games and actually expect to benefit from it. One of the reasons it's so stunning is the high overall brightness of 400 cd/m2. That's high even compared to desktop OLED monitors. And of course all the other inherent benefits to OLED panels, such as effectively unlimited contrast.

The mouse pad is seriously huge. Razer also knows how to make it feel extremely responsive, and both the Blade 16 and Blade 14 benefit from a snappy trackpad. These two highlights combined are almost enough to make me consider the Blade 16 for myself. Almost – that price is seriously huge, too.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- OLED
- Huge trackpad
- All the monies

SPECS **CPU:** CORE I9 14900HX / **GPU:** RTX 4080 (175 W) / **RAM:** 32GB DDR5-5600 / **SCREEN TYPE:** OLED / **RESOLUTION:** 2560 X 1600 / **REFRESH RATE:** 240 HZ / **WEIGHT:** 2.45 KG

G6X

GIGABYTE **$1,899**

Gaming first

6 The G6X isn't like the others in this group test – it's not a super-duper premium gaming laptop hoping to convince you to part with heaps of cash. It's much more sensible. If you think that means it skimps on components, you'd be wrong, however. The G6X comes with an RTX 4060, which it runs up to 105W, and an Intel Core i7 13650HX. They're paired with 32 GB of DDR5-4800, along with a 1TB SSD – hardly a budget spec. Since the GPU is running at full whack, this RTX 4060 laptop often defeats other budget models with similar, albeit slower, hardware inside them. There is an added performance mode to push things further, though it appears better able to unleash the CPU than add any additional GPU performance.

A fairly straightforward shell houses some fairly expected components. The screen is a bit bland, too, though it's at least a 16:10 model. It delivers what it aims to, and it's undoubtedly a good way to get a lot of modern tech, such as an RTX 40-series GPU, on a slimmer budget.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Excellent spec
- Good performance
- Tame design

SPECS **CPU:** INTEL CORE I7 13650HX / **GPU:** RTX 4060 (105 W) / **RAM:** 32GB DDR5-4800 / **SCREEN TYPE:** IPS / **RESOLUTION:** 1920 X 1200 / **WEIGHT:** 2.5 KG

TECH REPORT

Vesaro's motion platforms give you some of the G-forces and the full-body vibrations.

WHEEL LIFE

How real can your sim RACING SETUP get?

It's well-documented by now – the skills you develop in sim racing really do translate to the track. Last year's Gran Turismo movie charted Jann Mardenborough's journey from hotlapping in the eponymous Sony racer to competing in Super Formula and the World Endurance Championship, but he's just one of many who have successfully made the jump.

2019 World's Fastest Gamer winner James Baldwin has gone on to compete in British GT, winning several races. Numerous F1 drivers have now been schooled by sim racers – Enzo Bonito scaled Lucas di Grassi at the Race of Champions 2019, Valterri Bottas suffered the same fate at the hands of F1 esports champion Lucas Blakely, and in 2022 Blakely did it again against some guy called Sebastian Vettel.

It's settled, then: sim racers are fast. But in reality, they're not putting down their gamepads and then getting straight into a GT car. They've trained their muscle memory using wheels, pedals, and other peripherals that simulate the real environment as closely as possible. The trouble is, you can spend an ever-escalating amount of money on a sim racing rig, and the point of diminishing returns isn't always clear.

At the beginner end, Logitech's G920 force feedback wheel and pedals bundle offers a great entry point around the $340 mark. Thrustmaster's TMX bundle does the same for slightly less, if you can live with the plasticky feel. Both can be clamped to any desk, and both are belt-driven force feedback units whose tech introduces a bit more lag and a bit less detail than pricier direct drive wheels, but the jump from controller to budget wheel is significantly bigger than the dainty step from belt-driven to direct drive wheel when it comes to your driving experience.

Spend a few hundred quid more, and you enter a different kind of setup. One typically installed onto a rig rather than clamped to a desk, and where the hardware gets a bit more modular. Direct drive servos from Fanatec, Moza, Thrustmaster and more recently Logitech are the beating heart of higher-end sim racing setups. The feedback's faster, more powerful and more detailed because you've got a direct connection between the actuators generating the sensation and your hands. And since those servos – aka wheelbases – are expensive, they're usually standalone, able to house a variety of wheels.

Fantatec's higher end ecosystem is a good example. Once you invest in a direct drive unit, you have a choice of wheel shapes to reflect your discipline – GT, F1, rally or road models designed either for precise, gentle steering inputs or massive, lightning-fast rotations as you see from WRC or drift drivers. From there, you can add shifter and handbrake units, and pedals with different load cells, to build a cockpit that operates and feels like the virtual vehicle you're driving.

Two wheels bad?

While car racing is edging consistently closer to 1:1 simulation, the same can't be said of bikes. The most advanced hardware is Moto Trainer, a platform that houses a real bike. The problem: when you lean a bike on the track, you're looking way off to the side, at where you want to end up. On a simulator, the screen stays right in front of you and that compromises your body position.

FAR LEFT: Direct drive wheels give you more detailed feedback – for a higher price.

LEFT: Money no object? Virtual racing hardware can get pretty sophisticated.

GIANT KILLERS

Sim racers who graduated to the track

JANN MARDENBOROUGH
Not just a Super Formula racer, but star of his own Hollywood movie.

JAMES BALDWIN
British GT race winner who earned his drive thanks to his chops in World's Fastest Gamer 2019.

KEVIN SIGGY
Having now driven Formula E vehicles, he still competes in sim racing for Team Redline.

LUCAS BLAKELY
F1 esports champion with not one but two F1 drivers in his list of victims on the Race of Champions.

At this level, your hands are engaged in the simulation, but your body isn't. The bucket seats in sleds made by the likes of Playseat and Recaro put you in the right position to stamp on the brakes, but they're not actually exerting any forces on you. That's where electronic actuator platforms like Vesaro's Quad Motion come in. Priced around $23,000, it's a base that you build the sled and peripherals onto, and which changes in elevation with a travel of 1.5 inches to mimic the sensations of rolling over a track surface or trackside furniture, or the lateral and horizontal G forces you create with the throttle, brakes and steering inputs.

It's enjoyable, being thrown about on a platform of actuators. But truthfully most sim racers don't train in this way for the simple reason that the significant outlay doesn't necessarily lead to faster lap times. A consumer-grade actuator platform like this is immersive, but it's not the most practical setup for someone who trains every day, or anyone who travels and wants to set up their rig quickly in a new location.

MOTION GENERATOR RIGS

Meanwhile, a million miles and dollars away, is the very top end of simulator hardware: Dynisma's DMG. These are the motion generator rigs used by motorsport teams and automotive companies to train their drivers and develop new concept vehicles. And if you have deep pockets and a vast space in which to install their enormous platforms, which feature several metres of lateral and horizontal travel, you can buy one too.

When you accelerate in a Dynisma motion generator, you don't need to rely on a force feedback wheel to provide the sensation, because your entire chassis shifts backwards on the platform. Its low-latency electronic actuators respond with incredible agility to model the track surface, providing the tarmac rumble not through your hands, but through your whole body. There's pitch and yaw motion too, so when the back end of the car starts to step out on you, you're rotated in the cockpit. There's even a 360 variant which rotates you by... well, you can guess. Direct drive wheels are great and everything, but they can't do that.

YOUR HANDS ARE ENGAGED IN THE SIMULATION, BUT YOUR BODY ISN'T

The only downside, other than the tremendous amount of space required, is that professional motion generators of this calibre cost several million dollars, aka nearly enough to buy an Nvidia GPU. Given that the 5-series cards are expected within months, who has that kind of money to fritter away on sim racing hardware?

Sim racing's had its hurdles since the lockdown boom, most notably with supply chain, but also in event administration and viewership. However, on a hardware level the demand for both inexpensive rigs and professional equipment remains, and that's thanks to sim racing's increasingly accepted position as an entry point into motorsport. Every time a story breaks about someone like Lucas Blakely beating an F1 driver, some young hopeful buys a cheap wheel and pedals, keen to give it a go. And years later, maybe they end up strapped to a Dynisma rig, being paid for their services. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

TECH TALES

HEAVEN SENT

A brief history of graphical TECH DEMOS

Computex 2024 came and went. We saw the industry continue to shift its focus towards AI. We saw dissent in the ranks about the precise number of threads per core that should be considered optimum. We saw our own eyes glaze over whenever somebody mentioned VR. But what we didn't see enough were the tech demos that put all that abstract language and numerical claims into action.

How much more compelling would Dr Lisa Su's AMD keynote about AI have been if, instead of telling us how it could be used to get visuals onscreen without rendering them, she'd shown us? That's what you do when you announce a game after all, with the honourable exception of *The Elder Scrolls VI*.

There's an easy answer why Computex wasn't bustling with shiny tech demos: they're expensive. It takes a lot of time, talent and resources to assemble the assets and sequences required to wow people. But when we take a wider view at the industry's history, we learn that outlay might be worth it.

Tech demos were once the coal furnace that fuelled PC graphics' charging locomotion. They provided a tangible – if not always realistic – reason to upgrade our hardware, showing what might be possible with this new slab of silicon that was now available. Their place in gaming's pantheon should be charted.

Arguably the most famous of all comes from outside our natural habitat: the original PlayStation's 'dino' demo. The disc it lived on was part of the console's packaging materials. It was right there with your new machine; you might as well stick the disc in and give it a go. What greeted you when you did was a dinosaur whose like the PS1 never matched in its actual games, strikingly high-poly for 1995. *Tomb Raider* and *Dino Crisis* would shoot their shot, but none would come close to the tech demo T-rex. And before too much consternation's generated by giving a PS1 demo this much coverage, let's reassure ourselves that the dino was certainly developed on a PC.

DEMOS WERE SCENES CONSTRUCTED TO SHOW OFF ONE PARTICULAR EFFECT

GRAPHICAL IMPROVEMENTS

On home shores, it was graphics card companies and graphics engine developers providing the shiny-shinies. Epic Megagames, as we should never forget it was once called, were among the pioneers. The first trailers for *Unreal* in 1996 focused not on the story, setting or gameplay, but on the way Unreal Engine's lighting could make a gothic castle really pop.

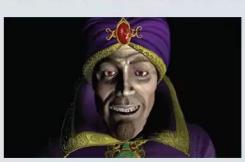
That set a precedent for what would become a great PC gaming tradition. Each new iteration of Unreal Engine seemed to usher in a new era for graphics, and unlike the likes of 3DMark, the rendering effects you witnessed in them were likely to turn up in the games you bought over the next 12 months. If you followed Epic's showcases, you started to develop an eye for what Unreal Engine looked like, what discerned it from id Tech or Lithtech.

Nvidia and AMD (nèe ATi) were early adopters of the practice too, the latter teaming up with Futuremark to produce short scenes showcasing what each new generation of graphics card was capable of. These demos were a jamboree of new techniques and effects all thrown into one scene, and they were invariably, to use the technical language of the time, strange as heck. Iridescent alien forms with too many limbs. Writhing sentient plants. ATi's demos were the most artistic sales pitch for graphics cards we've ever seen.

Over at team green, there was a more straightforward approach. Nvidia's demos were scenes constructed to show off one particular effect that its latest GPU could muster. The 'bubble' and 'grass' demos in 1999 caused quite a stir with their fidelity, showing scarcely believably reflection quality and independent, impressively flowing, blades of grass respectively. They weren't self-contained worlds like

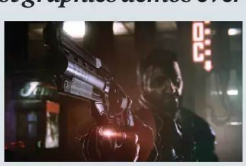
PHIL IWANIUK
There was a time when Phil Iwaniuk could tell you the average FPS of every GPU on the market in Heaven 2.5, to the digit. Book him for an after-dinner speech, and he'll tell you about it.

AVANT CARD *Four of the sexiest and strangest graphics demos ever imagined*

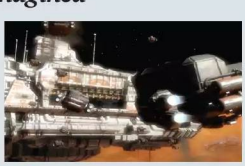


1 ZOLTAR THE MAGNIFICENT
The best way to sell Nvidia's GeForce 3 GPUs in 2001? A scary genie with ominous backlighting.

2 ISLAND 1
You're going to be gutted, James Cameron, because ATi's 2001 Radeon 8500 demo is Avatar before Avatar.



3 THE SAMARITAN
Unreal Engine 3 announced its spectacular ability to render people shooting each other in rainy alleyways in this 2011 gem.



4 3DMARK 05
Howmuch traffic can deep space possibly teem with? Futuremark was only too happy to show us. And melt our GPUs.

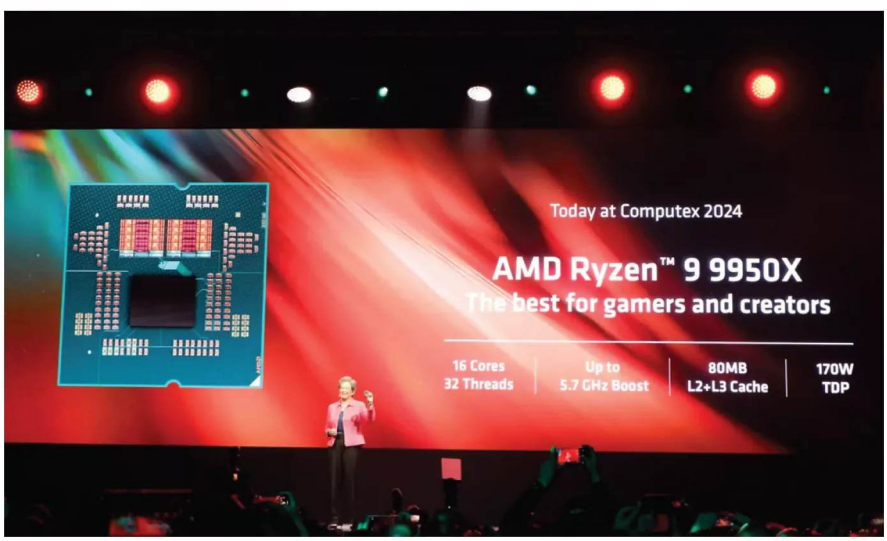
3DMark continues to push fidelity boundaries in 2024 – but is it as mind-blowing as it once was?

ATi's offerings, but boy did they make you want to buy a GeForce 256.

In parallel, 3DMark, and later Heaven, wanted to stress-test your silicon rather than flattering it. 3DMark's various jamborees of gunfire and reflections were the ultimate test in a pre-*Crysis* world, and Unigine's Heaven made full use of real-time tessellation to show us a magical quasi-medieval world and, in doing so, made DirectX 11 feel deeply exciting.

Perhaps the biggest gift tech demos have given us over the years is fluency in graphical effects. They trained our eye on what particular techniques actually looked like, exaggerating their use in specific scenes so that we could pick it out in the games that followed. And when we did notice ambient occlusion or tessellation being used in real time by our own hardware in a game, there was a satisfaction to that. As the modern industry locks onto AI with more vigour, it would do well to remember that old writer's adage that when it comes to communicating the advantages of those breakthroughs: show, don't tell. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



BELOW: AI was a big focus at Computex this year, but without visual benefit cases the messaging remained abstract.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

"The choice to have friendly fire turned on is one of the best decisions"

Dropping into HELLDIVERS 2 with the boys

"Where we dropping boys?" A common phrase used online when typically falling onto a battlefield with friends in the likes of *Fortnite*, *Apex Legends* and *Warzone*, to name a few. But most recently, I've been uttering the expression in *Helldivers 2* alongside the many patriotic chants from its frontline soldiers. "How'd you like the taste of freedom?" one says. "Say hello to democracy!" another yells. Or my personal favourite, "How about a cup of liber-tea?!"

Developed by Arrowhead Game Studios and published by Sony, *Helldivers 2* made its way to PC alongside PS5 in February, becoming the big surprise hit of 2024 so far. That success has amounted to 12 million-plus sales and counting. Now as somebody who usually doesn't get invested in online games, there's something brilliant about the gameplay loop of *Helldivers 2* and its focus on cooperative play that has captivated my group of friends for the first time since our school days.

MATT POSKITT

THIS MONTH
Fighting for liberty against a swarm of giant bugs.

ALSO PLAYED
Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth*

FOR SUPER EARTH!

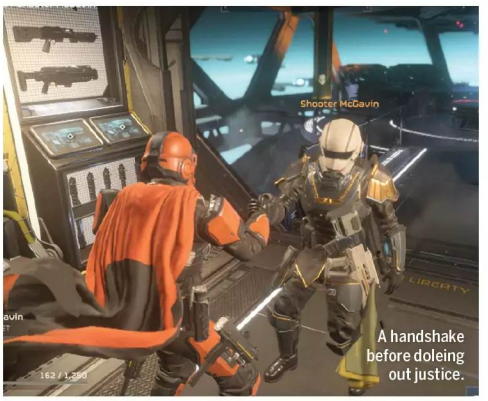
While we all still play videogames individually and occasionally band together in the odd instance, this is the first time since *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (yes, the first one) that we've all arranged nights to sign on and fight for the freedom of Super Earth. We've even gone as far as to create a dedicated WhatsApp group.

If it's not the third-person shooting that rewards smart play as opposed to blasting everything in sight, it's the variety of enemies that keep you on your toes next to the growing challenge that creates a satisfying loop that harkens back to classic PS2 gameplay. Then there's the satirical blind patriotism that's just fun to spout while charging at a 50-foot bug. That's hard to beat.

Joining one another's ship, we greet each other via in-game emotes, such as a salute, handshake or a

TOP: Freedom travels in style.

WE'VE EVEN GONE AS FAR AS TO CREATE A DEDICATED WHATSAPP GROUP



A handshake before doleing out justice.

cheeky hug. Having a personalised ship is a great touch, with a generous battle pass system that can all be unlocked without the need for real-life currency, if you wish. Then, as you level up, more weapons are unlocked – including Stratagems. These babies let you call down special weapons or ammo drops, or rain hell on all that stand in your way courtesy of orbital strikes. And they can be unleashed upon teammates.

FRIENDLY FIRE

The choice to have friendly fire turned on is one of the best decisions the developers could have made. It brings that sense of unease that anyone could turn on you in any instance, while equally not punishing the player too harshly for giving in to their treachery. Some of the best moments I've had playing *Helldivers 2* have surrounded calling a ridiculous number of airstrikes on one unfortunate ally. Then having them sit out as they wait to be reinforced is the cherry on top of this democracy-flavoured cake.

And none of this would be possible if crossplay wasn't a thing. So thank you, Sony, and thank you, Arrowhead, for allowing friends on different platforms to play together. ■

Leliana has such a beautiful, soothing voice.

"She's covered in blood, I'm loving it"

Reliving a bloody RPG past in DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Prayed to the Maker.

ALSO PLAYED
Dragon Age: Inquisition, Crysis 3

I rage, unlocking my unique berserker power of Final Blow, a deadly attack in which I pour all my pent-up energy and stamina into delivering huge damage to my enemy. This is because I need to finish this fight as soon as possible, and if this move hits it will bring death to the dragon my party and I are locked in mortal combat with.

My party, which consists of loyal knight Alistair, dual-wielding bard-turned-rogue Leliana, and the apostate witch Morrigan, has been fighting fiercely with this giant wyrm for what seems like an age, a dragon age if you will. I've attempted to wrangle every advantage I can out of the game's deep combat system in order to deliver victory, but things are close, despite much tactical pausing and health potion chugging.

But I'm now running low on health potions and Leliana, my party's true MVP, who has been the difference maker in this fight thanks to her rogue-ish critical blows from flanked positions, is about to drop. If she goes, I'm not at all confident we'll come out victorious.

BY THE MAKER

Praying to the Maker, my Grey Warden, a noble human fighter called Natasha, charges the beast and draws back a mighty blow... and, clearly my prayers were heard, as the Final Blow connects, taking a noticeable chunk of the dragon's health bar out and leaving it very close to death.

I've just used all Natasha's stamina, though, and without a shield, she's vulnerable to the dragon's now fierce counter-assault. Calling on Alistair to draw the dragon's heat, locking it down with his Threaten ability and then dropping into a Shield Wall position to try an absorb its talons and breath, I manoeuvre Natasha to the dragon's flank, and then call upon Morrigan, attacking from distance, to hit the dragon with a huge bolt of lightning.

The bolt connects, as too does a backstap from Leliana, and as Natasha swings her great axe one more time, the dragon's death is confirmed. Natasha leaps upon the dragon's back and then plunges her weapon into its head, causing blood to spray forth in a huge shower, and the beast collapses onto the snowy mountaintop. The dragonslayer? She's covered in blood, I'm loving it. ■

"While I hurl spells as a glass cannon, my pal rolls around jump attacking"

With the Seamless Co-op mod, the once fearsome ELDEN RING is at your mercy

Let me pitch you on a Don Draper-style rebrand for *Elden Ring*. I'm calling this new version of the game, nothing like the challenging experience you may have had inching your way through the Lands Between the first time around, *Elden Ring For Bullies*.

Behind this pitch is the *Seamless Co-op* mod, a beautiful thing that in the hands of two experienced *Souls* players transforms *Elden Ring*'s world full of deadly enemies into a playground of hapless Muppet babies ready to be pushed off their slides and tipped into their sandboxes. "Now Don," you might say. "That's just cruel! What kind of twisted jerk would want to be such a bully?"

But I know my audience: those of us who cursed our way through the poison swamp of *Dark Souls*' Blighttown, who fought *Elden Ring*'s Malenia 20 times over until we finally managed to dodge the entirety of her Waterfowl Dance without being sliced to bloody ribbons. There's nothing we crave more than sliding the icy knife of vengeance into a FromSoftware game's ribs while whispering, "Remember me?"

WES FENLON

THIS MONTH
Glintstone Pebbled Godrick the Grafted right in his ugly mug.

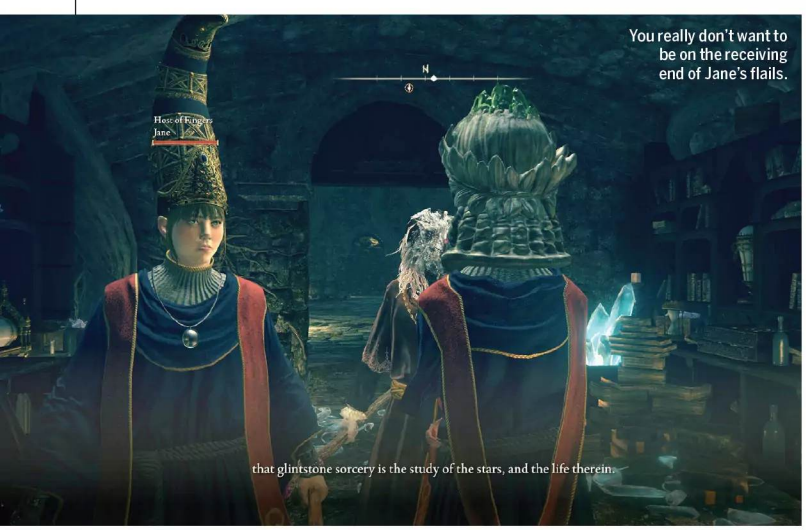
ALSO PLAYED
Shadow of the Erdtree

POWER FANTASY

That's been my glorious experience replaying *Elden Ring* with the *Seamless Co-op* mod, accomplishing in maybe 12 hours what took me days the first time around. Instead of giving up Torrent each time I wanted to hop into a session with a buddy to take on a random overworld Mad Pumpkinhead or Night's Cavalry, a friend and I cruised all around the map, venturing into Caelid to nab me the Meteor Staff before bouncing over to a cave to stock up on smithing stones to juice up my companion's flail. Instead of putting up with *Elden Ring*'s awkward desummon-resummon process every time we wanted to cross a threshold into a catacomb or legacy dungeon, we just... walked through the door. We voted on fast travel locations from the map screen and zipped to whatever site of grace was convenient for our next mission targeting a particular Erdtree Avatar or hunting for a spell to grow my glintstone repertoire.

I CRUISED ALL AROUND THE MAP, VENTURING INTO CAELID TO NAB ME A METEOR STAFF

While I hurl spells as a pure glass cannon, my pal rolls around jump attacking with dual flails, staggering even the toughest bosses in a couple of mega smacks. I can't recommend *Seamless Co-op* highly enough to anyone returning to *Elden Ring* after a two year absence, especially if you have a friend. We bodied Margit and Godrick, embarrassed Rennala right out of Raya Lucaria, and made the legendary Radahn look like a chump on a tiny horse. There's no need for fear in the Seamless Lands Between. Embrace your transformation from bullied to bully, because being the baddies just feels so damn good. ■


You really don't want to be on the receiving end of Jane's flails.
that glintstone sorcery is the study of the stars, and the life therein.

LEFT: Goin' for some kind of dark elf thing this playthrough.

BELOW: Ain't a beautiful view better together?

Henry's home from home in a fire lookout.

"You feel as though you are being observed, and not just over radio"

FIREWATCH's treatment of the outdoors means it's still relevant today

Blisters forming in place of other blisters, sweat streaming down your forehead and into your eyes, despairing at your water supply – even the most passionate fans of Campo Santo's 2016 wilderness adventure *Firewatch* would agree that it doesn't capture these realities of the outdoors.

Firewatch invites us to play Henry, a man seeking refuge from his stormy personal life by accepting a contract as a fire lookout in America's great outdoors. He takes this job with some embarrassment: for he has left his wife, who suffers early-onset dementia, to the care of nurses. While we hear Henry through Rich Sommer's nuanced performance, we see him through his hiking boots as they turn the soil of wilderness trails, and his big hands as they clamber up rocks. Though Henry does these things, *Firewatch* isn't a hiking sim.

What sets *Firewatch* apart and ensures its relevance is its understanding of something that eludes other games: how the outside sharpens the senses and heightens emotion. Everything you come across acquires profound meaning: an abandoned camp, leftover drawings, a fence where there shouldn't be a one.

KYLE HOEKSTRA

THIS MONTH
Hiked across Wyoming (virtually).

ALSO PLAYED
Jusant, *Warhammer 40,000: Boltgun*

SLOW BURN

This has much to do with the game's system of storytelling. Dialogue in *Firewatch* (exchanged over walkie-talkie with Delilah, the inhabitant of another lookout) is often contingent on unwitting player action. If, for example, you empty a trail cache of snacks, Delilah will rebuke the very idea and make you feel bad. It's discomfiting. You feel as though you are being observed, and not just over radio waves. Well, you are. *Firewatch* is silently tracking player behaviour and returning the appropriate dialogue. It doesn't wait for you to make such decisions. You don't even know you've made a decision, most of the time. That is until your radio crackles with Delilah's amused, or admonishing, voice.

THE EFFECT IS TO TRAIN YOU TO BE HYPER-AWARE OF YOUR SURROUNDINGS

When you investigate fireworks at the nearby lake, or make curious sightings on your walk back to your lookout, the game tees you up to report to Delilah everything you've spotted. You don't have to. But the effect is to train you to be hyper-aware of your surroundings.

Firewatch isn't like hiking, in the same way *Lonely Mountains: Downhill* isn't like mountain biking and *Jusant* isn't like climbing. But everything about the routines and rewards of these games is persuasive enough to make you think otherwise. ■

HUNTING FOR GOLD IN

WRESTLING EMPIRE

PART 3

Shark tanks, explosions and shameless shilling in the final part of The Detectorist's journey. ***By Matt Elliott***

When we last saw him, The Detectorist was enjoying a pleasant upturn in fortunes. He'd been fired, re-hired and injured, and had fallen victim to a systematic regime of bullying and belittlement by the owner of the promotion at which he worked. It was almost as if a hobbyist archeology gimmick based on a gentle ABC comedy was a poor fit for professional wrestling. But, in his most desperate hour, he was offered a contract by the Weekend Warriors, an MMA-themed promotion that specialises in shootfighting.

So, the good news is that The Detectorist has a paying gig again. The bad news is that he has never won via submission during his entire career. I'm not joking when I say this: I don't know which button applies a submission in *Wrestling Empire*, since I've spent most of my time throwing matches or setting fire to foreign objects. The Detectorist is wholly unsuited to this new direction, but destiny has made an incremental beeping noise. He must embrace this opportunity or face being buried beneath the loam, like the trinkets he so feverishly seeks.

UNDERGROUND WRESTLING

It's a trying start. For some reason, his first few matches are against the owner of the company, Danny Might, who's basically like a fire-damaged Lego version of Dana White from the UFC. The Detectorist pummelling him with a shovel, however, doesn't seem to damage their working relationship. Their rivalry builds to the point that they're booked in a sumo contest, which is a strange thematic twist for a match set within a steel cage. If it's possible to throw people over the cage, neither The Detectorist nor Danny Might know how. In the end, our trinket-laden hero wins via knockout. But it's not enough. He can't keep scraping by at the Weekend Warriors because the money is decent.

The frustration builds. In a moment of madness, he gets into a brawl with a superstar from another promotion – Federico Fisher, apparently – and The Detectorist throws him into the path of an oncoming train. Fisher survives, but The Detectorist is branded careless and his popularity plummets. As the late, great Owen Hart observed: enough is enough. It's time for a change.

For this paragraph, I would appreciate it if you imagine some montage music. For the first time in his life, The Detectorist embraces the new. He rebrands as The Coinshooter: a name that cunningly combines a love of mixed martial arts with archaeology. He learns some new strikes to better survive in the brutal world of cagefighting. And I even learn how to execute submission moves, because we're in this together. It won't be easy. But this is The Coinshooter's last furtive search for gold before the light of his career fails.

THEIR RIVALRY BUILDS TO THE POINT THAT THEY'RE BOOKED IN A SUMO CONTEST

PLANTAIN B

This leads to his first glimpse of real gold. Not a title match, sadly: a banana. Danny Might offers him $900 to shill the elongated fruit during the promo of his next match. As the rules of this diary state, The Coinshooter can't and won't turn down any opportunity to make money, so he does exactly as he's asked, to the total disgust of the crowd and his opponent, Slam Dunk. All his promos now will feature unsolicited banana facts, "Banana flavouring, such as that in sweets and milkshakes, doesn't taste like the actual fruit because it's based on a historic, almost extinct variety called the Gros Michele. It was wiped out by disease and replaced by the larger, hardier variety known as the Cavendish. And I'M GONNA KICK YOUR ASS."

As well as being a nice way to earn extra cash, having a banana is useful. The Coinshooter often ends up starting matches in poor condition, so munching some fruit at the start of the match helps recover some health. It also feels weirdly on-brand, especially with the gold trunks and thinning blond hair. He's like weaponised jaundice. His contract expires, but this time it's good news: The Coinshooter's dedication means that he's re-signed on a 'Downside Guarantee', meaning he gets paid whether he competes or not. And he takes full advantage of this after a press conference discussing his new contract. Instead of competing in his match, he snoozes in his interview chair and there's literally nothing the promoters can do. It's glorious.

From here, things start to get even weirder. He's booked in an explosion match against Miranda Jonas. It's a spectacularly violent fight that probably takes years off both our lives. On two separate occasions, the referee accidentally blows us all up when he's hitting the mat for a three-count. Jonas eventually wins, despite me suplexing her onto a stick of dynamite. The Coinshooter also develops compelling rivalries with Greg McMahon – *Wrestling Empire*'s

THE RULES

1. No shortcuts. Work your way up from the bottom.
2. No do-overs. Embrace the results, however badly it goes.
3. Money is everything, life is nothing. Make bank, crush opponents.

This sounds like an exaggeration, but it literally did. You should try one!
IT'S NO EXAGGERATION TO SAY THAT THIS BANANA CHANGED MY LIFE. I DON'T KNOW WHERE I'D BE WITHOUT IT!

take on intolerable Savile Row training dummy Conor McGregor – and Slam Dunk, who's essentially CM Punk with tattoos like scribblings on a toilet door. The latter, especially, has had a problem with The Coinshooter since the banana incident. He should probably try a calming banana tea for composure and restful sleep.

The rivalry with Slam Dunk, in fact, goes to such dangerous places that at one point I feel like this diary might end with an actual homicide. The wrestlers bump into each other in the subway, and, undeterred by the previous hit to his popularity following the fight with Federico Fisher, The Coinshooter decides to hurl Slam Dunk onto the tracks. The problem is that, thanks to *Wrestling Empire*'s esoteric and unpredictable physics systems, The Coinshooter also gets clattered by an oncoming subway train. Both superstars are pulverised, and the World's Most Dangerous Dirt Fisherman ends up starting his next match against Greg McMahon with literally no health. Thank the starchy gods for the lucky banana. Dunk ends up in the hospital, and The Coinshooter decides to truly assert his dominance by visiting him there and piledriving him through a stretcher. He even has time to pick up some more illegal steroids during the altercation. Life is good.

SHARK TALE

The rivalry against Greg McMahon also comes to a disturbing conclusion when we have a Shark Tank match. This involves the entire area being flooded, and we even have to swim to the ring while our entrance music plays, which is impracticable and undignified. Luckily, The Coinshooter's banana comes equipped with a protective covering – nature's cling film – which stops it from getting wet. I presume the point of this match is to throw your opponent into the water, but, once again, we're in an MMA cage, so the watery surroundings have no bearing on the match. It does, however, mean the entire stadium is flooded until the next event, which makes navigating the backstage area a watery chore. Apart from that, it's all going well. Alarmingly well. The Coinshooter is signed on a new contract with a win bonus, and he's in the best physical shape of his life. The Flaxen Relic Recoverer should be happy, But he isn't. All the bananas in the world are no substitute for the championship gold that still eludes him.

It's almost a relief when he's approached by Wrestling Revolution, a smaller circuit where, allegedly, one of The Coinshooter's former friends performs. He's signed on a fat contract, with a juicy $3,100 a week, and he even has health insurance. As a British Person, this is the first time The Coinshooter has realised that he didn't have health insurance before. He forms a tag team with a new partner, Onna Bugeisha, and they form an effective pairing. They smash up most of the Wrestling Revolution opposition. They even take part in a bull rope tag match, although they end up attached to each other, which seems to slightly undermine the whole purpose of the match. Within a few weeks, they've both reached the limit of popularity at the smaller promotion. They are the biggest fish in a small shark tank.

There's another issue, too. The Wrestling Revolution booker insists that The Coinshooter wins a championship, which is entirely outside his control, given the RNG elements of *Wrestling Empire*. Also, if there's anyone who has influence over that, it's surely the person who runs the company. But this has always been The Coinshooter's ultimate goal, so he embraces the challenge. Sadly, this means saying farewell to Onna Bugeisha, since the game will keep booking us in tag matches while we're a team, and I'm not even sure that Wrestling Revolution has tag team belts. We part on good terms.

I discover, after about 20 hours of playing, that the roster screen in *Wrestling Empire* lets me speak to every wrestler in the game. Not

BANANA-RAMA!

Five fruity facts about The Coinshooter's champion snack

1. Bananas are a great source of potassium, which can lower blood pressure!
2. Their scientific name is musa sapientum, which means 'fruit of the wise men'.
3. Bananas float! Handy for Shark Tank matches
4. Rubbing a banana peel on a mosquito bite will help stop the itching!
5. Bananas can be used to polish precious metal, such as championship gold!

BELOW: This isn't going to end well for anyone, is it?

THE COINSHOOTER SEEKS OUT YAP MASSACRE AND DELIVERS A BEATDOWN

only does this mean that I don't have to schlep around a possibly-flooded arena, but I can also pinpoint a federation's champion and try to manufacture a rivalry. I decide that this isn't a shortcut, since I'm not actually booking matches and there's every chance the champion will tell me to do one. It takes a few attempts, but eventually, the Wrestling Revolution heavyweight champion, Yap Massacre, agrees to take on The Coinshooter a week before the deadline set for me by the booker (which, hilariously, is April 1).

RONMAN AGE

In true WWE-style, The Coinshooter seeks out Yap Massacre backstage and delivers a beatdown. He also steals his title and heads to the ring wearing it, just to experience the heft of a championship belt around his waist. It suits him. He feels naked without it. The Coinshooter's milky dadbod deserves and requires a title. The day of the match eventually arrives, and he's booked in an Ironman match: in this case, a ten-minute fight in which the wrestler with the most pinfalls or submissions will win once the time is up. But there's another caveat: it's an explosion match. The same type of match that almost killed The Coinshooter when he was at the Weekend Warriors.

It's sickening, preposterous violence, and for the first five minutes neither wrestler can score a fall. There are only two minutes left, and, if I'm honest, I'm starting to panic. Massacre kicks out of everything I do, and I'm not fired up enough to hit my finisher. Then, in a bizarre series of explosive events, the ref throws some dynamite out of the ring, which sets fire to a chair. And then the chair sets fire to a table. The Coinshooter powerbombs Yap Massacre through the flaming table and gets his first pinfall. He follows it up with signature move, a jackhammer he calls Throw In The Trowel, and it's basically over. He's two falls up with 30 seconds to go.

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CAREER KILLER
The Detectorist has been branded negligent for injuring Federico Fisher!

The Coinshooter has done it. He's a champion. The obsessive search for gold comes to an end. He might have won his championship on April Fool's Day, but this is no joke. Nobody will ever disrespect him again.

His first event with the belt takes place... and, amazingly, somebody has stolen his clothes. Another wrestler offers to find them for $1,270, but The Coinshooter refuses, as the rules above dictate. This might be the biggest night of his life, but it's no excuse. The Wrestling Revolution audience has a new champion: a naked one, apparently, who carries a banana. Perhaps it's time for another rebrand. ■

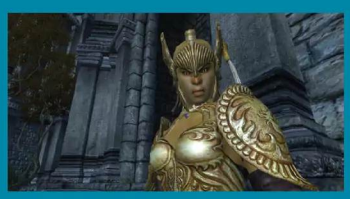
ABOVE: How to avoid danger in a cage match.

THE SHIVERING ISLES IN OBLIVION

The Elder Scrolls at their wildest and wooliest. *By Jody Macgregor*

LEFT: "It is a most elusive fish."

RIGHT: Can't think what I've done to upset the guards this time.



There are lots of things to dislike about *Oblivion*. The yam-faced NPCs. The boring main questline. The speechcraft minigame. The levelling system that punishes you for not grinding secondary skills. While the last is inescapable without mods, the others stop being issues, or at least recede into the background, when you go to The Shivering Isles.

There's a portal in Niben Bay that lets you escape the trad fantasy land of Cyrodiil. Bypass the guard telling you only crazy people enter and they come out even crazier, and on the far side you'll find a humble waiting room with a ticking metronome and a flat-voiced man waiting at a table. Does his collar make his bald head look like it's emerging from a flower? Yes, but everything else about him and this room is profoundly ordinary. Then you sit down, and in the tones of an officious immigration officer he tells you you're about to enter a land that's holy to Sheogorath, the Prince of Madness. Then the walls dissolve into light and butterflies, which swarm past to reveal a landscape of giant mushrooms under clouds like dancing fireflies.

IT IS A SILLY PLACE

The Shivering Isles is split in two. Mania is a bright wonderland full of iridescent bug monsters whose blood will get you high. Dementia is a faded swamp full of glum people who would probably be better off drinking medicinal bug-juice. Prince Sheogorath is just as bipolar as his realm, his goofy ramblings usually ending with a grim threat. It's not a land to be taken seriously.

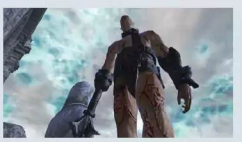
It's difficult to make a character in *Oblivion* who doesn't look like they've just been dug out of the ground, and Bethesda ran with that in creating the gurning stretch-faced goobers of the Shivering Isles. Their twisted smiles and wide-eyed leers take the cheek sliders to sinister extremes.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE Mar 30, 2007	**DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks	**LINK** elderscrolls.bethesda.net

LOONY PLANET

Travel writing about an imaginary place



THE FRINGE
The Gatekeeper offers visitors a muscular welcome.

HALCYON CONSERVATORY
Where the Duke of Mania does his painting and drugs.

VITHARN'S RUINS
"Come to the scenic Isles, join the endless ghost war!"

DEMENTIA'S SWAMPS
If your favourite adjective is 'pallid' you'll love it here.

SHEOGORATH IS RARE IN HAVING TWO SIDES TO HIS PERSONALITY

Sheogorath is rare in having two sides to his personality. Almost every other NPC is so focused on a single trait that to call them two-dimensional would be an insult to paper. Jayred Ice-Veins won't shut up about bones. Duchess Syl is paranoid about assassins and spies. Amiable Fanriene is afraid of walls falling on him while he sleeps.

They're all extreme stereotypes with absurd vocal tics, and Bethesda's in-house voice actors clearly have a great time with them. A cast who struggled to portray the ordinary folk turn out to be better-suited to the cartoon exaggeration of the Shivering Isles, where everyone talks like the 'Where is My Fish?' scene from Monty Python's Meaning of Life.

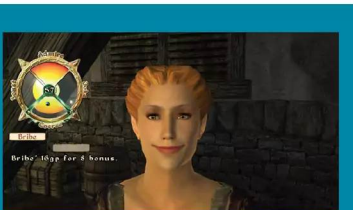
Which is why it's difficult to be upset by the portrayal of mental illness. There's a blacksmith who self-harms, which you can tell because her name is Cutter and every line of dialogue she has references cutting. Drug addicts and suicide risks are presented with as much sensitivity as the guy who is obsessed with one fork in particular.

SIDEQUEST CITY

Sidequests are the best thing about *Oblivion*, and the Shivering Isles is all sidequest. In the ruins of Vitharn you find ghosts fighting an endless siege, repeating the battle that led to their deaths. Work your way inside the fortress and you'll meet ghosts who explain how their failures led to Vitharn's fall and damn them to this repetition. To free them, you have to break the cycle. Find arrows for the archer on the wall, find a power source for the wizard, find the doll the warrior is convinced he's married to and eventually they'll change their fate and earn their freedom.

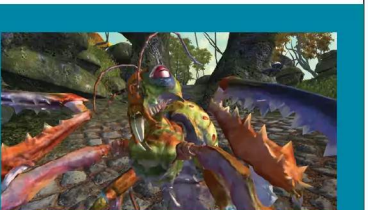
That's hidden in a corner of Dementia you probably find just by exploring, which the Shivering Isles richly rewards. Work your way onto the roofs of Crucible, the Dementia half of the city of New Sheoth, and you'll find stashes of trinkets hidden away as well as a fight club who meet at night to bash hell out of each other. You may also stumble across Split, a town where everyone has a double.

If you missed the bizarro fantasy of *Morrowind*, it and its giant mushrooms have been hiding in this corner of *Oblivion* the entire time. ■



LEFT: Perfectly normal *Oblivion* NPCs.

RIGHT: This is what I see in my nightmares.



THE PCPP INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE FREEMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE**

Frank was dead. Battered to death with a crowbar. His cracked cranium lying in a pool of blood that crept, like a dark tendril, towards the abandoned weapon. It had no prints. Damn. Had Frank met a sticky end because of an affair with a married woman, Cora, the new owner of the PC gaming cafe? An act of vengeance by her angry partner? No. Nick 'The Greek' Papadakis, Cora's former husband, was dead too, killed in a car crash three weeks ago.

The LAN gaming cafe had been set up by Nick, a one-time Valve employee, as something to keep him busy in retirement. Over the years since it had developed into a haunt for professionals like me who needed PC gaming information off the books. This was why I'd visited, looking for a help on my current case, tracking down the source of a fresh wave of *Half-Life 3* disinformation that had been causing great pain and confusion within the PC gaming community.

But now Frank was dead and Cora was catatonic. Grabbing Cora by the shoulder, I span her around: "Cora, snap out of it! Nick and Frank are dead! What happened?" After a moment she seemed to come around. "Oh Dick, they made me do it. But I never thought it would come to this… oh, my darling Frank." She started sobbing. "It was the Console Gamer Collective, Dick. I never loved Nick but when Frank, an agent for the CGC, asked me to marry him so they could infiltrate the PC gaming community and spread lies about *Half-Life 3* online, I couldn't say no. I loved him, Dick! Have you ever been in love? I'd do anything for Frank. But Nick was on the verge of finding out, so Frank killed him and made it look like a car accident. I'd begged him not to, Dick, pleaded with him. It was a step too far, but he said it was war and the CGC would do anything to mess with PC gamers.

"But why's Frank's ticket been punched, too, Cora?" I replied. "Did he cheat on you?" "It wasn't me, Dick!" Cora wailed. "I loved him!" And it was at that moment we both noticed a letter had been silently posted through the cafe's mail slot. It simply read, 'The Freeman Always Rings Twice', and was signed with the initials 'G F'. Taking a cigarette out and striking a match, I took a long drag, before concluding, "I guess Frank had to answer the second ring".

CASE CLOSED

...UNTIL **OCT 21**

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